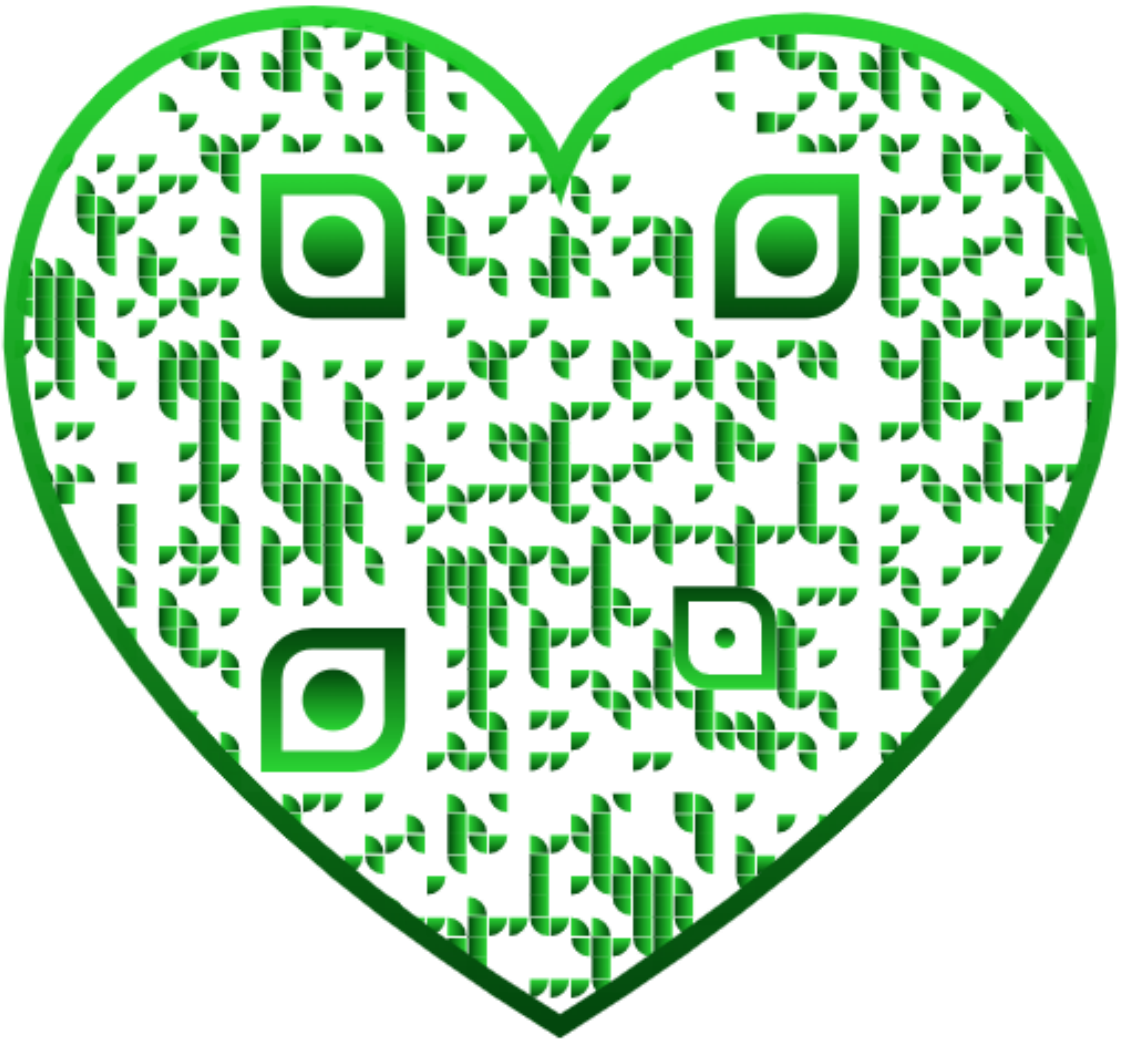
Rolling Stone

JULY/AUGUST 2022
ISSUE 1365/1366

THE HOT LIST 2022

Megan Thee Stallion

Will Not Back Down



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THE HOTLIST

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HOT POP PHENOM

CONAN GRAY

P.68

PLUS

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AND MORE

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Megan Thee Stallion, photographed in Phelan, California, on April 25, 2022, by **Ramona Rosales**.

Fashion direction by Alex Badia. Production by SJ Ashby and Ryan Holt for Anderson Hopkins|Kindly Productions. Hair by Kellon Deryck. Makeup by Lauren Elise Child. Nails by Michelle Nguyen. Styling by Eric Archibald and Hanna Isaksson. Tailoring by Alex Navarro. Bodysuit by Rey Ortiz. Earrings and bracelets by Alexis Bittar.

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Update

Getting a Little Closer to Justice

LEGAL NEWS Four years ago, Paul Solataroff's *Rolling Stone* feature "And Justice for None" [RS 1304/1305, January 2018] exposed grotesque misconduct by law enforcement in the state of Massachusetts and helped lead to the exoneration of more than 37,000 defendants who had been charged with drug infractions under questionable circumstances. The story went on to spawn the hit Netflix docuseries *How to Fix a Drug Scandal*, featuring crusading lawyers Luke Ryan and Dan Marx, who revealed corrupt practices in crime labs and in the district attorney's office. On June 1, Ryan and and Marx won another victory, bringing in a sum of $14 million to repay thousands of victims for the fines and fees they'd been forced to pay into the system — *after* they got out of jail. "This settlement can never make our clients whole for the jobs they lost, the spouses who left them, and the children they lost touch with while in prison," says Ryan. "And it's not as much as we'd hoped for, or our clients deserved. But it is the first-ever class-action award for drug defendants. If nothing else, it sets a precedent for other states to follow."

The Return of the Only Podcast You Need to Know

LISTEN UP It's been a minute, but *Rolling Stone* and OBB Sound's *Too Long; Didn't Watch* podcast is back this summer with a batch of 10 new episodes for Season Two. Each week, our chief TV critic, Alan Sepinwall, is joined by celebrity guests like Natasha Lyonne, Max Greenfield, Ilana Glazer, and Yvonne Orji to watch a classic TV show that the guest has somehow never seen before. This time around that includes modern classics like *Sex and the City, Mad Men,* and *Friday Night Lights.* The catch: We show them only the very first and very last episodes of each series, and they have to figure out everything that happens in between. Will the shows make any sense at all? Is this even a good way to tackle the problems posed by Peak TV? We're still not sure, to be quite honest, but it's damn sure fun trying to figure it all out. Available wherever you get your podcasts.

Contributors

COVER STORY

Up Close With Megan Thee Stallion

When Megan Thee Stallion and Mankaprr Conteh pulled up to the studio to hear some of the rap queen's new music, an engineer offered Meg's guest some tequila. Just one problem: There was nothing around to chase it — so Meg gave up some of her own lemonade. "She was very gracious," says Conteh, whose profile of the Hot Girl (p. 48) is her first *Rolling Stone* cover story. "It's telling that she's maintained this positivity in spite of all the negativity she's endured." Conteh has been following Megan since the rapper's early days, drawn to her raunchy lyrics and forceful personality. "It's nice to work with people whose discography and persona mean something to you," Conteh says. "To spend time with someone who is reshaping the perspective of gender in the genre is cool."

Conteh

KING PRINCESS

Capturing an Iconic Image for a Star of Today

Gioncarlo Valentine wanted to give "classic *Rolling Stone,*" mixed with a hint of Lady Gaga, when he shot King Princess (The Mix, p. 15, as well as our latest digital cover). "I was trying to find the balance between something that felt polished and glossy, and something that felt honest," he says. Valentine adds that he enjoyed exploring the star's vulnerable yet hardened energy — and it helped that King Princess knows what she wants. "If KP doesn't like it, she'll say, 'This isn't working,' " says Valentine, who's been photographing for 12 years and lives in New York City. "I appreciated the clarity."

MAGGIE ROGERS

Illustrating the Soul of a Singer-Songwriter

The green boa that Maggie Rogers wears in the video for her recent single "That's Where I Am" became a focal point in illustrator Jody Hewgill's "visual response" to the singer's new album, *Surrender* (Reviews, p. 117). "I liked the metaphor of surrendering to one's desire," Hewgill says. "And to the chaos of a situation that's out of your control." For her, the green boa symbolized "something luxurious that covers, but that also represents an artificial embellishment." Hewgill, who has worked with *Rolling Stone* since 2000, nailed that sultry, seductive look in her portrait of Rogers.

ON THE BATTLEGROUND

Following the Story Across Continents

Mac William Bishop (National Affairs, p. 44) is a writer, photojournalist, foreign correspondent, and filmmaker who originally hails from Colorado; now, he's basically from everywhere. After serving in the U.S. Marines for 14 years, he left in 2012 to cover foreign affairs and military issues across five continents and multiple conflicts. The multilingual journalist has worked everywhere from *Foreign Policy* to *The New York Times* to NBC and earned five Emmy nominations, among other prestigious awards. Bishop currently resides in Ukraine, where he's been sending dispatches from the front lines.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: RYAN STOKES/@_RYANSTOKES; COURTESY OF GIONCARLO VALENTINE; BALVIS RUBESS; COURTESY OF MAC WILLIAM BISHOP

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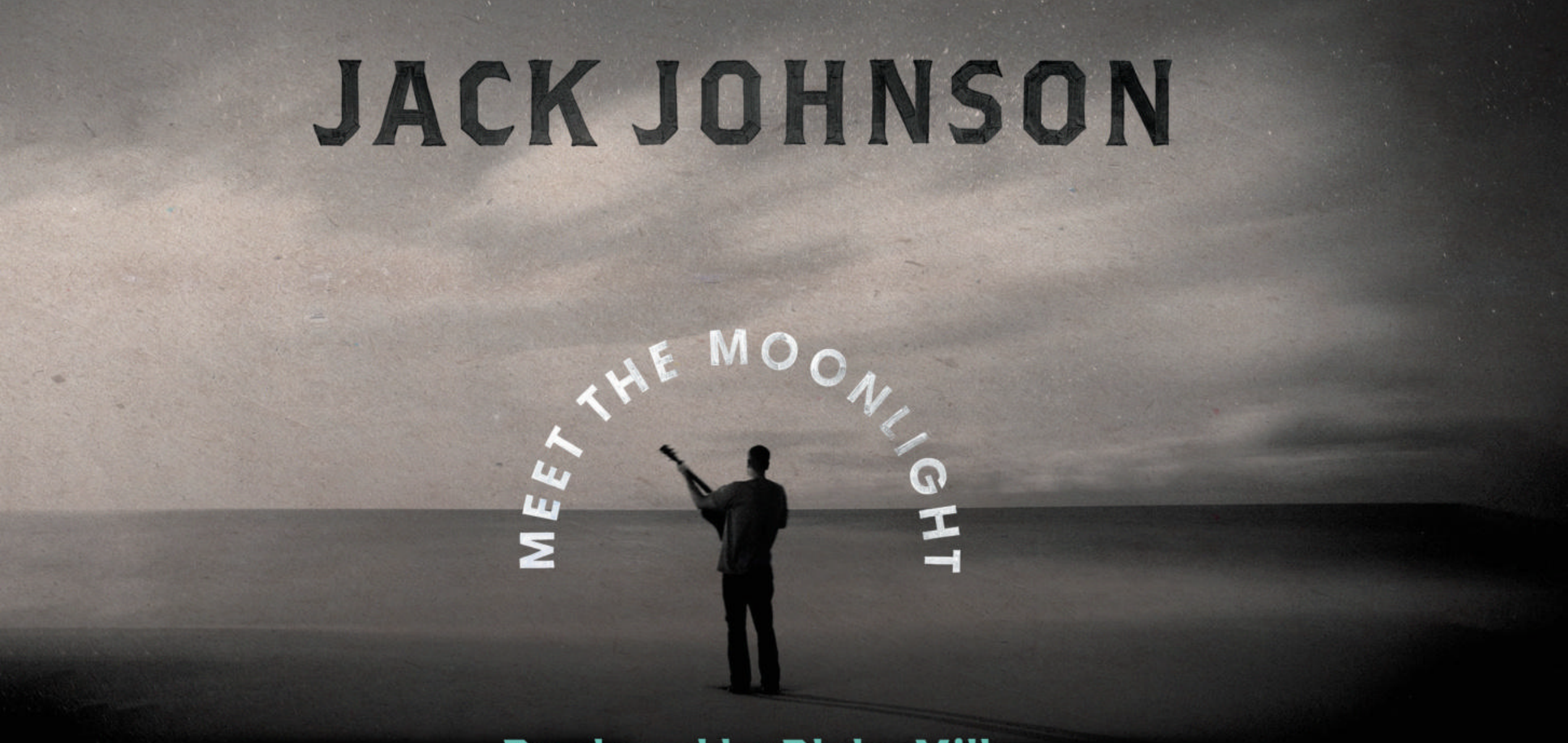

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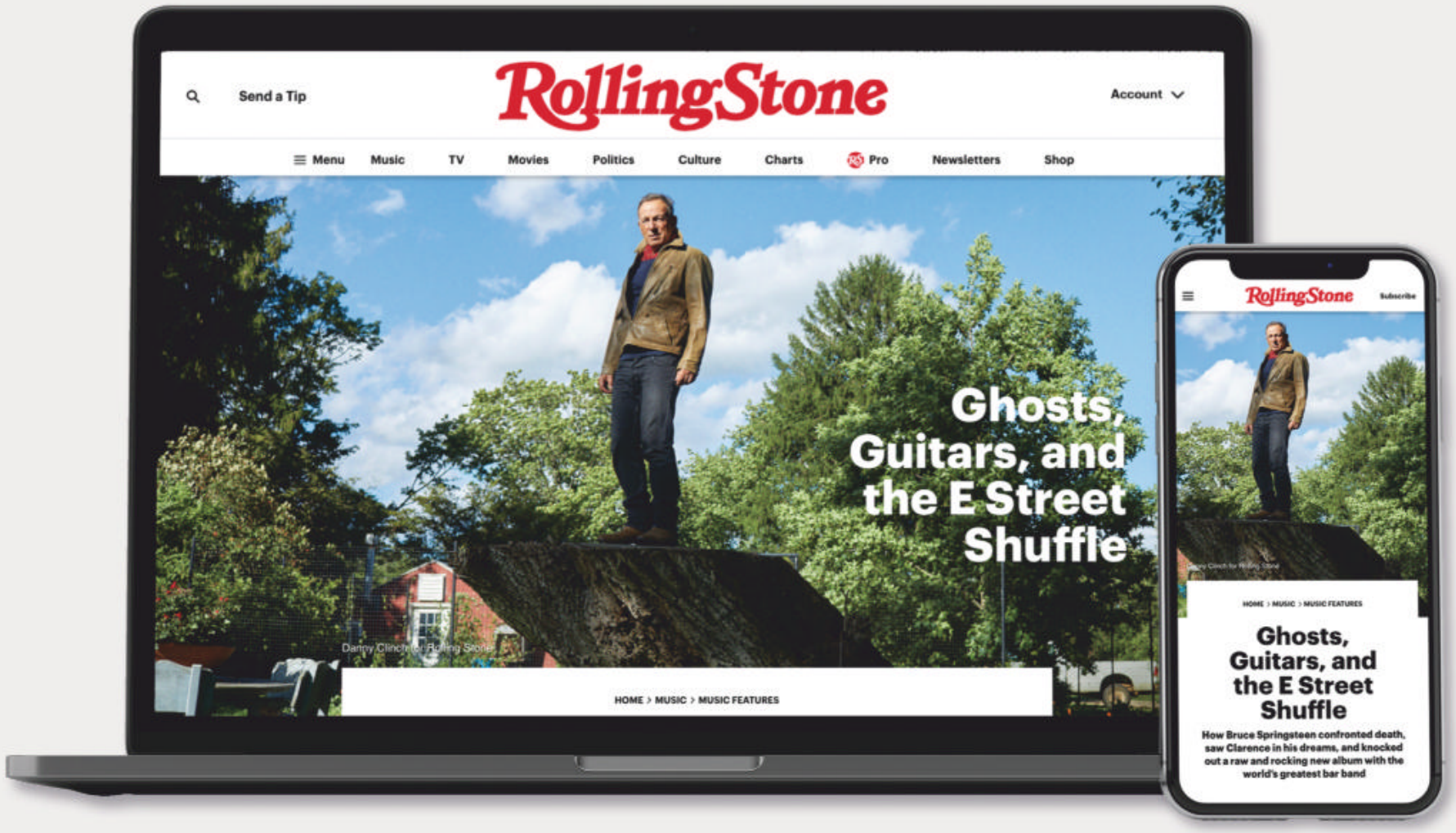
Brushfire Records

Aussie Punks Invade New York

SOME PUNK bands might have trouble translating their inherently scrappy art form from their natural club habitats to larger stages. But at their biggest headlining show to date — at New York's 1,800-cap Brooklyn Steel in May — Melbourne's Amyl and the Sniffers leveled up beautifully, suggesting a sweaty mashup of the Stones and the Stooges, with singer Amy Taylor flinging herself around the stage like a renegade aerobics instructor. "It's not always easy for an Australian pub band to come play overseas," Taylor says, "so what an honor to get the response of people wanting to come down and have a good feral time." **HANK SHTEAMER**

Amyl and the Sniffers' Amy Taylor and Fergus Romer at New York's Brooklyn Steel



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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

King Princess' Wild Life

The most outrageously quotable rock star of her time is determined to be herself

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Gioncarlo Valentine**

KING PRINCESS

KING PRINCESS has a new song she can't wait to talk about. It's a breakup song that starts out soft and dreamy before erupting into a scorched-earth mid-Nineties rager, with the biggest chorus she's ever belted. But the description that really nails "Change the Locks" – the one that makes King Princess beam as she shares it – came from someone in the studio, who said it sounds like menstruating at Lilith Fair.

"I was like, 'Cunt! That's *exactly* what I'm going for!' " she says. "It's a journey."

This is what it's like to converse with Mikaela Straus, 23, the indie-pop visionary behind King Princess. With her feathery, shoulder-length chocolate-brown hair and extensive knife collection, she exudes a rock-star persona as purely savage as anyone in her generation – she could be Marc Bolan reincarnated or a long-lost cousin of John Lydon, dropping brazen one-liners in between hits from her vape pen. She uses the word "cunt" in almost every sentence, so much that her publicist is worried her quotes will be unusable for this story. A story, by the way, that Straus feels she was born for.

"I remember when it hit me, that as a queer person, I could be in this magazine," she says. "I remember Megan Fox's cover, and she was talking about masturbating to girls. It was incredible to hear this woman talk about fucking and coming. I was like, 'There you have it, folks! I could be in this.' "

It's early April in Brooklyn, and Straus is on the cusp of completing her new album, *Hold On Baby*. We're at Mission Sound, her father Oliver's studio in Williamsburg, the neighborhood where she grew up. Even though she partly lives in L.A. these days, she has a true New Yorker's preference for her hometown. "I come back and I'm the person I'm supposed to be," she says. "Nothing better than being stony-baloney on the train."

She describes the studio's vibe as "shabby chic," gesturing to the tattered, multicolored kitschy couches around her. There's one wall separating the studio and home, and classic-rock memorabilia is everywhere. A platinum plaque for "1950," Straus' breakthrough 2018 hit about queer love, is framed on the wall.

Straus was just exiting her angsty teens when she debuted with that song, an R&B slow-burner that caught the attention of Harry Styles, who tweeted the chorus lyrics and immediately got 100,000 retweets.

Some rising artists might have flinched under that pressure. Straus grinned and strapped her new fans in for the emotional roller coaster that was *Cheap Queen,* her debut album that arrived a year later. The record shows Straus howling her woes across soulful grooves as if her insides are on fire, with song titles as bluntly literal as it feels to get your world shattered when you're 19, like

CUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

"Do You Wanna See Me Crying?" and "You Destroyed My Heart."

Now Straus is in her longest adult relationship yet, with creative producer Quinn Wilson, and she's a pretty happy person overall. ("Ish," she corrects.) Like many songwriters before her, she found that this made it difficult to write. "I was like, 'What is my purpose?'" she says. "'I'm not heartbroken; I'm not pissed at some girl. How do I write music if it's not about getting back at someone?'"

In February 2021, shortly after she attended the funeral for her 89-year-old grandfather, Straus' team booked her some sessions with Aaron Dessner – the scruffy multi-instrumentalist who added his indie-folk sensibility to Taylor Swift's *Folklore* and *Evermore* – at his home studio in upstate New York. "I was like, 'I don't know if I can handle meeting anybody,'" she says.

Straus ended up staying at Dessner's cozy barn studio for a total of five days. She'd walk in the snow to his house, and his wife would make her coffee before they got to work.

Hold On Baby came together through those sessions and others with Ethan Gruska (known for his production work with Phoebe Bridgers), producer Dave Hamelin, and mixing engineer Shawn Everett. "All I've ever really wanted was to feel camaraderie in making music, and I started to feel that," Straus says. But she emphasizes that first and foremost, it's a King Princess record – she plays many of the instruments, and co-produced every track. "I'm at the helm of this ship," she says. "Or else it wouldn't be my music."

Take the silky horn section that floods out more than halfway through "Crowbar." "I played those by hand on a Mellotron," she says. "A full horn section, track by track. Shawn was like, 'Bitch, I have spent so much time and money hiring horn players, and this whole time I could've just had you with a Mellotron?' It's the cheap queen within me."

One of the album's highlights is "Winter Is Hopeful," a sultry stunner written for Wilson, whom she began dating four years ago, after messaging Wilson on Instagram claiming she loved her work. "I made a little lie," she says. "I did love her work, but I didn't know it was her. So she thought it was business, and was really upset when she found out it wasn't."

Straus has fantasized in detail about their engagement. "There's a flock of owls by me," she says. "I'm on a horse, riding through a field, and Quinn's on another horse. The horses are riding to each other. We stick our fingers out as we pass and put the rings on each other." She pauses, then looks up. "That's going to take a lot of planning."

Off the final 4-train stop in the Bronx, within 400 acres of woods, sits a tomb in the shape of an Egyptian funeral barge. In it lies Isidor Straus, the co-owner of Macy's, who went down with the *Titanic* in 1912, along with his wife, Ida. (They are the elderly couple on the bed, with water rising around them, in James Cameron's *Titanic*.)

The Straus' grave is a mecca for *Titanic* diehards, but their great-great-granddaughter doesn't really give a shit. "You know where I will not be caught dead? There," she says, deadpan, and very much still in Brooklyn. "I'd sooner die on a cruise ship than go to that cemetery."

Straus' connection to history's most famous maritime disaster caused immediate online backlash in 2019 – even when she clarified that she is far from a spoiled heiress. "My family is so estranged on that side. I didn't receive any coins," she says. "They're salty people."

Yet she understands why industry-plant accusations are so prevalent in music. "People are frustrated by the socioeconomic state of the industry," she says. "I totally get where it comes from. I'm just not that girl. I'm not going to front like I was some rich kid. There were tough moments, and there still are."

Straus' parents, Oliver and Agnes, divorced three years after she was born in 1998; she stayed at her father's studio on Wednesdays and weekends. "All I wanted to do was be in that fucking studio," she says. "There's photos of me butt-naked with a microphone, standing on that table. For kids, I think it's the shit. It expands your brain."

"I was like, 'What is my purpose?'" she recalls thinking before this LP. "'I'm not heartbroken; I'm not pissed at some girl. How do I write music if it's not about getting back at someone?'"

Other realms were more challenging. She rode horses and played sports, in part because those activities helped her wrestle with questions of identity. "When you're a little nonbinary kid and you put on a uniform that's neutral and you get to put your mind into one activity and not think about all the other shit, it's really healthy," she says.

Straus says she knew she wasn't a girl before she knew she was gay. "It took me a long time to figure out the language," she says. "It's always been a part of my music. Playing with it, discussing it, making jokes about it."

Her parents found out she was queer when she was 13, after they read her texts. "It was so glaringly obvious," she says. "But honestly, it was no thang. Some parents have that moment where there's just that one blip of like, 'But grandchildren!' And then you're like, 'You can have [children] and be fully gay.' And they're like, 'Oh! Never mind.'"

Straus moved to L.A. to attend the USC Thornton School of Music, but lasted only a year. "1950" came out less than a year later, and on the same day her guitarist quit out of frustration that the band wasn't going anywhere, Straus got a meeting with Mark Ronson, who promptly signed her to his Columbia Records imprint, Zelig. "He allowed me to be me," she says. "And he saw the value in that, instead of trying to be like, 'Well, if you did this and this . . .'"

She says now that she slipped into a hyper-feminized persona on her first album, almost as a way to mask behind her sudden fame. "I was this kid dealing with '1950' popping off and my life changing, and I was fucking terrified and insecure," she says. "*Cheap Queen* was my armor, and now I don't need it. I got rid of the armor."

Straus and I walk to lunch in Williamsburg, passing by her old haunts. She's already admitted she trusts no one from Los Angeles and can't drive, but this is where her inner New Yorker truly comes out. She points to McCarren Park, where she played soccer as a kid. Then she spies the apartment where an old hookup used to live.

"She had a boyfriend, and he was a DJ," she says casually. "I told him straight up, 'I will fuck your girlfriend if you disrespect me.' And then I did. He started crying."

An ad for Jell-O shots in the window of a bar sparks another memory from a couple of months ago. "I was in Dallas at my favorite gay club, called the Round-Up, and that was my dinner," she says proudly. "I had about seven to 12 [shots]. Delicious."

Earlier this year, she opened for Kacey Musgraves alongside the queer trio Muna. "Kacey made a conscious decision to bring out people that were reflective of what the audience looked like," Straus says. "I thought that was a really fucking cool move."

Then she gets frustrated, thinking about the low percentage of out queer artists in music. "It's still not the norm," she says. It bothers her that LGBTQ artists are reductively grouped into playlists, even if their music sounds nothing alike. "White Male Pop, as a playlist," she quips. "Could you imagine?

"We're still the minority," she concludes. "We've got to unify. That's my biggest thing. We've got each other."

Straus has been getting noticed on the street more these days, especially in her hometown. "It's been a lot of really sweet, positive messages from the gays," she says. "This old man stopped me on the street today and was like, 'I love your work.' I was like, 'Oh! Reaching different demographics!'"

In a moment like this, it's hard not to feel like she's taking her rightful place in a long lineage of glamorously disheveled downtown rebels – people like Lou Reed, Patti Smith, and David Bowie. Maybe the best comparison, with her unfadeable bravado and hair perfectly out of place, is a Julian Casablancas for a new generation of LGBTQ kids.

"That's my goal," she says, smiling. "Just in a trench coat." **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**

FAST FACTS

FUZZY FEELINGS
Straus takes comfort in her menagerie of pets, who include a two-year-old border collie named Raz; a cat; and several goldfish named after pop stars like Jazmine Sullivan, Adele, and Stefani Germanotta.

BOLTS, CUT
Fiona Apple is one of her best friends in the industry. "She's been an incredible North Star for me," Straus says. They got matching tattoos in 2020, and one of Straus' new songs is named after a lyric from Apple's "I Know."

FREE AS A BIRD
On the cover of *Hold On Baby*, Straus poses with a barn owl. "She's shrouding me with her wings, and I'm looking cunt and glam, obviously. Prince had his doves. I think the owl is mine."

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LYRICAL COMMUNION

MUSE FOSTERS COMMUNITY BETWEEN THE LINES OF YOUR FAVORITE SONG

PRESENTED BY

JIM BEAM WELCOME SESSIONS

In our second Welcome Sessions feature with Jim Beam, we dig beneath the live music frills to explore how strangers in the crowd become quick friends by talking to the supergroup and their most passionate fans

Written by Kwasi Boadi

There's something so communal about going to a Muse show. The experience has a way of inducing a unique catharsis. On the one hand, it's hard to ignore the tremendous feeling of it all, from the hypnotizing laser light show to the rousing pyrotechnics and the otherworldly visuals.

But beneath the (literal) flash and frills lies something much more intimate. Fans are embracing, fists are pumping, and in spurts, the audience takes on the role of lead vocalist while they roar the lyrics of their favorite records. In these moments, complete strangers become part of something much larger than themselves because there's community to be found between the lines of your favorite song.

Muse fans at The Cavern for their Jim Beam Welcome Sessions homecoming show

"Nothing beats being in the crowd with music fans when you don't know what the setlist is," says self-proclaimed superfan Helen Rose Tooth. "When they start bringing out the songs, and bring out some rarities, and everybody just comes together, you get picked up by the atmosphere."

Rolling Stone caught up with Rose Tooth and a host of other Muse diehards at a secret homecoming show in Exeter, Devon. Hosted by Jim Beam as part of their Welcome Sessions event series, the intimate gig brought Muse superfans back to the Cavern, a cozy music venue in the South West of England where the band started out by playing for some of its earliest supporters: friends, family, and classmates.

When asked about her favorite song to see live, it only takes Rose Tooth a moment to land on "Definitely 'Knights of Cydonia'" as her answer. Tom Kirk, a longtime friend of the band, doubles down on the sentiment. "'Knights of Cydonia' is the ultimate fan singalong. I don't think Matt needs to even stretch his vocal cords for that anymore because the whole crowd in the arena or festival [is] just bellowing it out. It's an electrical force of people being completely tuned into the moment like nothing else exists."

It's easy to hear why the record elicits a range of emotions from the Muse faithful. The song kicks off with a spellbinding harmonica solo by bassist Chris Wolstenholme. Though everyone in the house knows what's coming next, the anticipation builds like a roller coaster inching closer to its first big drop. Then, at the perfect moment, Matt Bellamy sends the audience into an auditory free fall once he interjects with a few crackling strums of his electric guitar.

ADVERTISEMENT

When you're singing along to lyrics that speak to you, that feeling you get is irreplaceable, and it runs much deeper when you look to your left and see a fellow fan sharing in that communion. There's a bond created there, an understanding that the words that made such a pronounced impact on your life have struck a chord with someone on a similar frequency. At that moment, a would-be stranger feels more like a kindred spirit.

This belief that you truly feel connected when belonging to a community is rooted in Jim Beam's two-century history of bringing people together, and that sentiment is evident in talking to another Muse superfan, Hannah Chandisingh. "you're all in that together," she says. "And when they break out these really powerful songs, when you actually realize that you and the person next to you are both in floods of tears, [there's this sense that] 'I don't know you, but I love you.'"

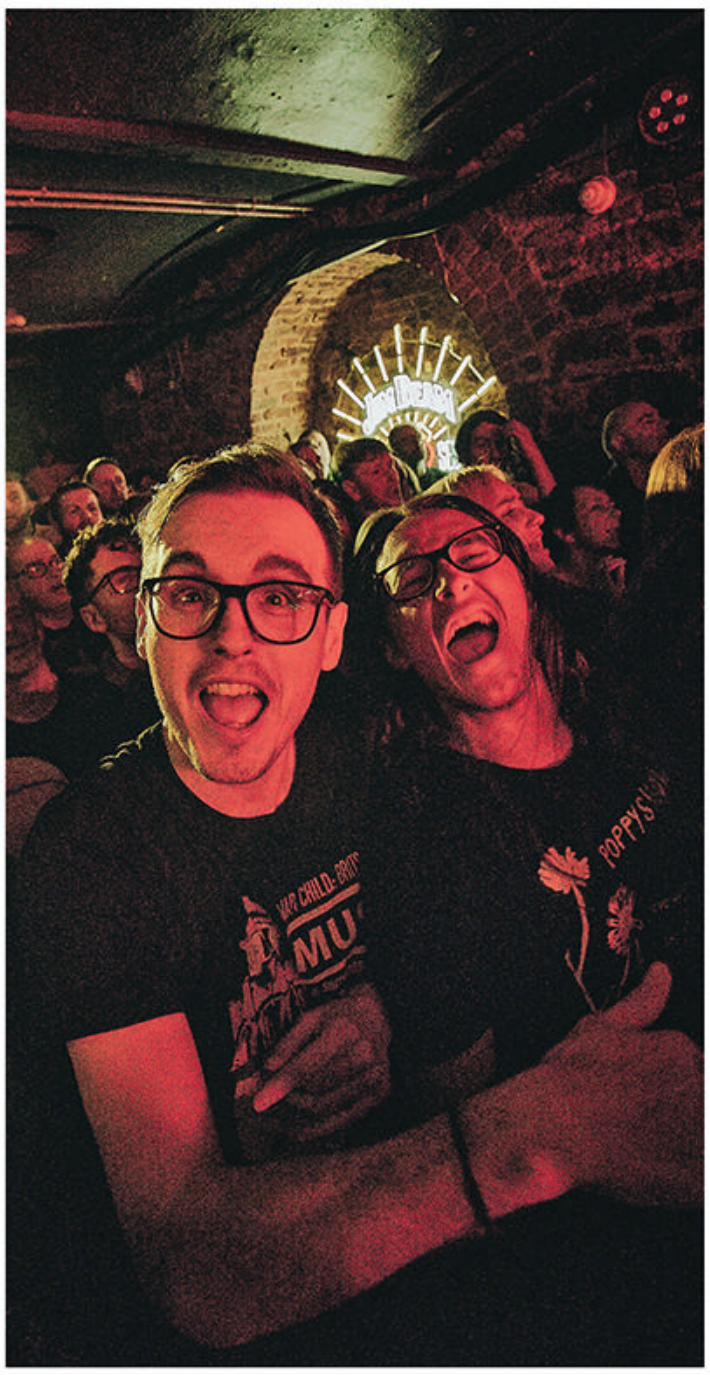
It's a feeling that can transcend language and borders. Danny Yeates has vivid memories of his first Muse show outside of the UK. "I went to Madrid for a VIP experience in 2016," he recalls. "The fan base was just so different. This guy literally collared me, and [we] just started singing along. Generally, in the UK, it doesn't really happen that way. The cultures are very different, but we're here, and the universal language is Muse."

Muse frontman and songwriter Matt Bellamy describes this lightning in a bottle as equal parts method and magic. "It's hard to describe the emotions that you feel on stage. Spiritual, I guess some people could describe it that way," he says. "It's something otherworldly. Very connective with thousands of people."

Early on, Bellamy realized the impact his songwriting could have if he penned lyrics with inclusivity in mind. "Over the years, [I realized that] you know what? I can actually play with this and start writing songs using 'we' pronouns instead of 'I' and singing about myself. 'The Uprising' was the big moment where I was like, 'I'm going to change this song. Instead of it being about me, I'm going to make it about us,' and I sort of deliberately wrote the lyrics with that in mind."

That communal spirit can be just as stimulating for the performer as it is for the audience. Muse drummer Dom Howard speaks warmly of that synergy. "It's an amazing feeling," he says. "It's kind of this really reciprocal feeling of you enjoying what you're doing and them enjoying what you're playing. It's a wonderful thing where you're very much tuned in to each other and aware of how everyone feels."

In the mind of a songwriter, that reciprocity is a catalyst for growth because feeling understood can be an invitation to push the envelope even further. Bellamy observes that, "there's a vulnerability in songwriting because you're digging into workings of your personality and expressions and experiences that you've had," he says. "There's a kind of confidence that emerges over time when you realize how many other people there are in the world that can relate to that. And over time, that actually gives you a bit more confidence to maybe dig deeper."



> "AND WHEN THEY BREAK OUT THESE REALLY POWERFUL SONGS, WHEN YOU ACTUALLY REALIZE THAT YOU AND THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU ARE BOTH IN FLOODS OF TEARS, [THERE'S THIS SENSE THAT] 'I DON'T KNOW YOU, BUT I LOVE YOU."

— Hannah Chandisingh

Muse superfans, Hannah Chandisingh, Danny Yeates & Helen Rose Tooth

ALL TOGETHER FOR THE MUSIC

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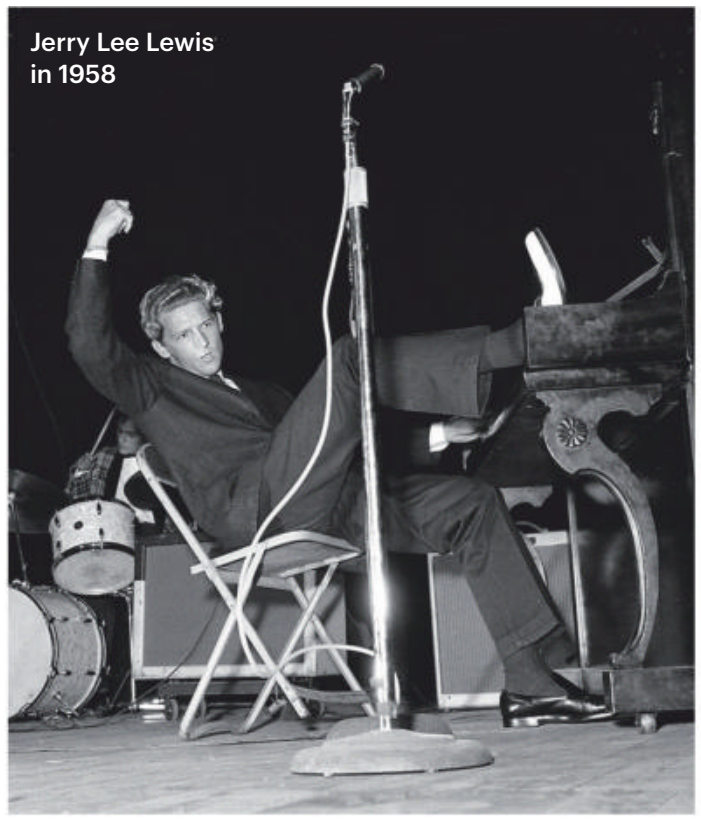

Jerry Lee Lewis in 1958

DOCUMENTARY

Ethan Coen Takes on Jerry Lee Lewis

He thought he was done making movies. Now, he and his wife-collaborator, Tricia Cooke, are back with the story of the Killer

ETHAN COEN WASN'T exactly a Jerry Lee Lewis scholar, or even a fan. Sure, the Oscar-winning filmmaker knew "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" and "Great Balls of Fire." He knew about Lewis marrying his 13-year-old cousin in 1958 and the ensuing scandal – but that was about it. Coen had also, by his own admission, "left the movie business." Then, he and his wife, film editor Tricia Cooke, found themselves several weeks into a lockdown in the spring of 2020. "I think [the mentality] was: We'd make a movie about almost anything right now," Coen says.

It was around that point that they got a call from music producer T-Bone Burnett, proposing a Lewis doc. Two years later, Coen and Cooke's *Jerry Lee Lewis: Trouble in Mind*, due for release through A24 this year, presents a portrait of the Killer in his own words. Told solely through archival clips, TV appearances, and concert footage, the movie liberally skips around through his life, with an emphasis on the second phase of Lewis' career as a country & western artist. You get a sense of who the man banging the keys and kicking away stools back in the day was: crazed, righteous, untamed, talented as hell.

"We didn't want to do . . . the voice-of-God, history-of-rock movie," Coen says. "The more you see aging rock stars talk about what a great influence he is while sitting in front of a bland background, the more depressing it is." Adds Cooke: "We're both fans of 'Let the artist do their own talking.' And because we had access to so much footage – because Jerry Lee has been performing for decades – it was easy to piece that together." **DAVID FEAR**

A24 FILMS

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

TOUR

1. The Weeknd

Four years removed from his last run of shows, the Weeknd finally embarks on his After Hours til Dawn Tour this summer, kicking off in Toronto in July. Spanning 19 dates in North America, the tour is Abel Tesfaye's first-ever stadium run and will support his two latest critically acclaimed albums, *After Hours* and *Dawn FM*.

BOOK

2. 'The Islander: My Life in Music and Beyond'

In this new memoir, Chris Blackwell looks back on the seminal moments he witnessed in music history, including the recording of Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Catch a Fire*. He also writes about his childhood and adventures in Jamaica — you can feel his love of the island, its people and music, and all he owes to the place.

PODCAST

3. 'Deliver Us From Ervil'

From *Rolling Stone* contributor Jesse Hyde comes a true-crime deep dive about a group of fundamentalist polygamist Mormons who headed down to Mexico in the early 20th century to start their own society. (So far, so Mormon.) But after a power struggle ensues, everything goes off the rails.

TV SHOW

4. 'Reservation Dogs' Season Two

For the second season of Hulu's sly, surreal, beautiful, and silly tale of four indigenous teens coming of age in rural Oklahoma, there's talk of reversing curses, grandmothers who aren't really grandmothers, and the perpetual hope of running away to California.

ALBUM

5. Lee Bains and the Glory Fires' 'Old-Time Folks'

The latest from Alabama singer-songwriter Lee Bains is a roots-punk masterpiece: a concept album about the past half-millennium of collective Southeastern resistance, from the Muscogee tribe to BLM uprisings.

DOCUMENTARY

6. 'Fire of Love'

Documentarian Sara Dosa gives us the greatest lava-fueled love story ever told, recounting the romance of Katia and Maurice Krafft. The two French scientists met, fell for each other, and traveled the world together, all of it spurred on by their mutual obsession: volcanoes.

MOVIE

7. 'Nope'

Jordan Peele has been mum on details regarding his new horror movie. All we really know is that there's a mysterious, menacing object that shows up in the sky above the small town where Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer, and Steven Yuen live. But the *Get Out* and *Us* director has said that he wants to get audiences to say the title word as much as possible — which suggests he's got something uniquely terrifying up his sleeve.

SINGLE

8. Bad Bunny's "Ojitos Lindos"

The most sparkling highlight of Bad Bunny's *Un Verano Sin Ti* is this sweet and breezy duet with Li Saumet of Colombian electro-pop stars Bomba Estéreo. Voices intertwining over languorous horns and romantic guitars, they don't just sing about the rush of a new summer love, they embody it.

ALBUM

9. Ezra Furman's 'All of Us in Flames'

With influences from Sixties girl groups to Bob Dylan's Eighties records, the singer-songwriter wrote the album during the early days of the pandemic, meshing growling vocals with songs about building communities in the ashes of a hostile world. "I wanted to make songs for use by threatened communities, and particularly the ones I belong to: trans people and Jews," she said.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: WES FRAZER; JOHN PARRA/WIREIMAGE; CHRISTOPHER POLK/NBC/GETTY IMAGES; UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 3: TONJE THILESEN

PROFILE

Back to the Future With Bachata's Superstar

Romeo Santos made the music industry come to him. Now he's got the 'Formula' to do it again

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

FOR MANY years, the music business seemed to think that Latin artists needed to follow a stereotypical crossover path to get global attention. Major acts, such as Bad Bunny and Maluma, debunked that idea by becoming undeniable stars without changing their sound or style to fit into the Anglo pop world. But years before either artist came along, it was Romeo Santos – the dimpled bachata heartthrob known for his sky-grazing falsetto – who helped pave the way by refusing to give into the industry machine.

Santos got his start singing in New York in the legendary boy band Aventura, which brought the traditional Dominican genre of bachata to the mainstream. He launched a solo career in 2011 with *Formula Vol. 1,* a head-turning debut that featured massive names, including Usher, who performed on the song "Promise." "I was one of the first to really be like, 'No, no, nah, I want these artists to sing in my Latin rhythm,' " Santos says in a recent Zoom call from Miami, where he lives. "To see now, a decade later, that some of the biggest records in this industry have that essence of Latin music, I feel like I was part of that."

Formula Vol. 1 was a huge success, and 2014's *Formula Vol. 2* was even bolder. Ever since, as he's worked on other wildly popular projects, fans have always wondered if, and when, they might get a third volume of *Formula*. Santos hasn't been totally sure either – but during the pandemic, he started working on a set of songs that felt striking and unexpected, full of fusions and collaborations that continued to slingshot bachata into the future. He played them for friends, and they all had the same reaction: "This feels like *Formula*."

That's how he decided he was finally ready to give people *Formula Vol. 3,* out this summer. "I've never been afraid to experiment with bachata. I've always been able to create ideas that aren't the norm, unorthodox," he says. "There are some music proposals that people are going to be shocked to hear, because I've never done them before, with artists that clearly are icons."

Stretching the limits of bachata is something Santos has been doing since his Aventura days. The band came together in the Bronx in the Nineties; Santos was just a teenager and became the lead singer. The foursome originally called themselves Los Tinellers, but after changing their name, they released their debut as Aventura in 1999. Immediately, they drew attention for taking bachata – a genre that's been historically ostracized and vilified since blooming among the Dominican Republic's working class – and blending it with sleek R&B and hip-hop. To Santos, their approach was simply a reflection of the musical influences around the band as they grew up. "I mean, it would sound cool to tell you we were scientists with our shit," Santos says. "We studied, but it wasn't even about studying. It was just so organic."

Aventura broke records with blockbusters like 2002's *We Broke the Rules* and 2009's *The Last*. Though the band split up for a few years to pursue solo work, fans rejoiced in 2019, when the members announced they were reuniting for their first tour in a decade. The tour sold out in minutes and positioned them for a wildly successful comeback, but sadly, several dates were canceled because of the pandemic. The guy kept making waves anyway, tapping Bad Bunny for 2021's "Volví" – a track the Puerto Rican superstar immediately loved. "I said, 'Listen, I'm pretty sure you're working on pretty huge shit, but this is just an idea I have,' " Santos recalls telling Bad Bunny. "The response was 'Hell yeah!' without even listening to the idea."

When we talk, Santos is putting the final touches on *Formula Vol. 3,* perfectly timed to a renaissance happening right now: Along with Bad Bunny, acts like Rosalía, the Weeknd, C. Tangana, and Nathy Peluso have all jumped on bachata in the past year. Other Latin genres, including Dominican dembow, have gone global, and Latin stars are now some of the biggest on the planet, confirming what Santos always knew: "We were always fly. We were always killing it. But now, everyone's paying attention."

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Devin Christopher**

A Short Guide to Romeo Santos' 'Formula' Series

Formula Vol. 1 (2011)
Santos could have easily tried to make a solo debut that catered to U.S. radio. Instead, he got Usher to sing bachata — and went platinum three times.

Formula Vol. 2 (2014)
This time, he got Drake and Nicki Minaj to sing in Spanish, solidifying Santos' place as bachata's leading man and leaving fans hungry for more.

Formula Vol. 3 (2022)
The first preview of his latest installment is "Sus Huellas" — a lovelorn ballad brightened by a light synth arrangement that he describes as the "best of both worlds."

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Say Sue Me in Busan: Sumi Choi, Byungkyu Kim, Jaeyoung Kim, and Sungwan Lim (from left)

SPOTLIGHT

Say Sue Me: Sweet Indie Rock from the Seaside

Close-knit South Korean band aims for 'bright energy rather than sadness' on their great new album

"I COULD BARELY SPEAK when I was four years old," says Sumi Choi. "But I did sing, and I would sing this very sad song." There's a pleasant candor in conversation with Choi, 34, the lead vocalist of the Busan, South Korea, quartet Say Sue Me: Even across Zoom, and with assistance from an interpreter, it's evident that the cozy surf rock that has brought the group an international audience is rooted in the members' easygoing attitudes. On their third album, *The Last Thing Left,* Choi and her bandmates – guitarist and songwriter Byungkyu Kim, 37; drummer Sungwan Lim, 34; and bassist Jaeyoung Kim, 25 – expand their range with more emotional nuance and bigger melodies than ever before. "We've always been sincere," Choi says. "But we want to deliver bright energy rather than sadness."

Say Sue Me have never been tied to the prevailing musical trends in their home country. Since they're based in a sunny beachside city 200 miles southeast of Seoul, the densely populated capital, they are far from South Korea's biggest pop stars and underground acts alike. They're not working in the mold of the past three decades of Korean indie bands, either: "We listen to a lot of American indie-rock music," Choi says. Byungkyu Kim adds a lovely sentiment: "Everything in Korea is focused on Seoul, but we were born in Busan and never left. We can find meaning here."

The band practices in a space close to Busan's Gwangalli Beach, whose crystalline cove faces skyscrapers, restaurants, bars, and hotels. There's a feeling of genuine camaraderie at the heart of the group's music, which can make the lonely process of songwriting challenging for Kim. "But when we come together and record," he adds, "that's when it's fun." JOSHUA MINSOO KIM

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Hasisi Park**

CLOSE-UP

Billy Eichner's Big Gay Hollywood Rom-Com

The co-writer and star of 'Bros' explains how he made a landmark same-sex comedy for the ages

By BRIAN HIATT

"I NEVER THOUGHT a major studio would do an authentically gay film," says Billy Eichner, "and treat it the same way they would *Bridesmaids* or *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*." Eichner is the star of *Bros*, the groundbreaking, instant-classic gay rom-com that he also co-wrote, which is due in theaters Sept. 30, with a big push from Universal Studios. In the movie, co-written and directed by Nick Stoller (who also directed *Sarah Marshall*) and co-produced by Judd Apatow, Eichner plays Bobby, a media personality who finds his neurotic self-sufficiency disrupted when he falls in love with Aaron (Luke Macfarlane), a guileless lawyer. For Eichner, arguably still best known for the daredevil comedy of his pedestrian-accosting, celebrity-razzing series *Billy on the Street,* becoming a leading man at 43 feels like a belated return to a path he always meant to pursue. "As a kid, you don't think, 'I could be the star of this movie if only I wasn't gay,'" he says. "I went to see Tom Hanks movies and thought, 'I could do something like that.' It was only in my mid-twenties when I started to think, 'I'll be lucky if I can just play the neighbor on a sitcom.' Because that's what Hollywood was telling me."

A romantic comedy that's not about straight people opens the door for tons of fresh material.

It's a peek at a culture of dating and sex that straight people think they understand, but they don't. Two men together is a very specific romantic situation. Because yes, we're gay. But we're still men. I think straight people think we're basically women. We are men! I always say to my straight male friends, "Think about all the weird, fucked-up male shit you have in your brain, about sex and monogamy and being vulnerable, and now times that by two." That's a complicated situation, and we've really never seen it explored.

Bobby's opening rant, excerpted in the trailer, is a brilliant meta attack on the idea of making a gay movie that'd make straight guys comfortable. How did you come up with it?

It's been on my mind. We're getting so much queer content, and it's all great and a sign of progress. But queer people have spent a lot of time telling stories about ourselves while being concerned that we're palatable to straight audiences. For me and a lot of my friends, when we watch some of those shows, although there are gay characters, we don't recognize those people. They're two-dimensional, wearing cutesy little outfits, and it's all done with this satirical veil. One of my goals with *Bros* was to lose that archness and have the characters feel like fully fleshed-out, complicated, funny, sad, three-dimensional people.

Sexuality aside, a big, lush, urbane studio comedy about grown-ups is actually a throwback at this point.

I'm in my forties, and I look around at movies in general – especially comedies – and say, "Where are the adults?" [*Laughs.*] I grew up with those great James L. Brooks movies and Nora Ephron movies and Woody Allen movies. I wanted to hold [*Bros*] to a higher standard than what's passing for romcoms these days. But as much as I love *Broadcast News, Moonstruck, Annie Hall, Tootsie,* LGBTQ people are completely ignored in those worlds. We weren't even the best friend!

You've said that you never experienced homophobia until you entered the entertainment business. What form did that take?

In 2006, I had a manager who represented a lot of Broadway talent. She said, "I'm inviting big agents to your next stage show. Can you make it a little less gay this month?" I was shocked. It was insulting, and also impractical, because that would be like literally changing my entire personality. I said, "You don't really know what you're dealing with, because I have a rebellious streak, and I'm not going to deal with that shit." [I got] signed anyway. But she wasn't wrong. It was a real obstacle in my comedy at the time.

What was it like coming to terms with your identity growing up?

My perspective on these things has always been so skewed, because I was born and raised in New York City, with very liberal, accepting parents who both lived in the West Village, like in the Sixties and the Seventies. And I'm not saying they were dying for me to be gay, but they knew who I was really early on, and they were so supportive.

There's a part in *Bros* where a teacher questions whether elementary-school kids are old enough to learn about gay history. Did that end up being more timely than you expected, given what's going on in Florida with the "Don't Say Gay" law?

I could not have anticipated that. In fact, I remember writing that [part] and thinking, "I hope people don't think that this is unrealistic," because it seemed that we were making progress. But we were never taught our own history as LGBTQ people, even in a threadbare, generalized way. We have no sense of ourselves historically. And I don't think we realize what that did to us, [to] know nothing about ourselves.

What's the closest experience you've had in real life to the romance in the movie, where your self-reliant character finds himself falling in love for the first time relatively late in life?

I had an experience in my mid-thirties where I had not seriously dated anyone in a long time, and, all of a sudden, I met someone who really shook me up, who I fell for very quickly. It was short-lived. But it did open my eyes in terms of relationships and made me think, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't completely ignore that part of my life." I was talking to friends about it, and they said, "Wow, Billy has feelings!" Anyway, that didn't work out, and then I put the wall right back up! [*Laughs.*]

You're working with Paul Rudnick on a movie for Amazon called *Ex-Husbands*. How's that coming?

We're just starting to write it, but I'm very excited. Sitting around during Covid, I thought, "What if we did a gay version of *The War of the Roses*?" Because we see so many happy gay couples. We get gay people falling in love and everything is beautiful and hunky-dory. This is the other side. Just because we can get married doesn't mean marriage is the answer to everything for gay people and that all those marriages are gonna work out. And there's a certain pressure on LGBTQ people who get married to really try to work it out. So I thought the idea of a gay divorce would be really funny.

You stopped doing *Billy on the Street* in 2017, but culturally it feels like it's never left.

It's had a whole new life over the course of the pandemic. It's on streaming services, and the biggest thing of all became TikTok – which, I don't have a TikTok page! Fans started to rip the clips, and there are multiple *Billy on the Street* pages on TikTok with millions upon millions of views. I took a look the other day [and] there was one clip with 50 million views. There are probably 12-year-olds watching them who were literally not born when I first started doing them, which is really shocking. It just keeps having this crazy afterlife.

You had a moment on there years ago with Chris Pratt. You tell him something like, "Someday you're gonna play gay and win an Oscar, and I'm still gonna be on the street doing this shit."

It was kidding. And it wasn't kidding. Although, look at me now! [*Laughs.*] So I mean, he'll still win an Oscar for playing gay, but I'm not on the street anymore. At least I get to be in a movie playing gay also. So that is progress.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Lauren Withrow** | **29**

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SUMMER ESSENTIALS

The Coolest Summer Gear

Stretch out, plug in, and rock out with these products to let the great times roll

AFTER TWO SUMMERS of uncertainty, there's one thing we're sure of: It feels damn good to be out again. Whether you're heading to the beach or just cruising around town, these products will make it your best getaway yet. Think speakers that double as karaoke machines, earbuds you can take into the ocean, and – for high rollers – the return of a classic Sixties car with a 007-inspired twist. We've tested, and test-driven, each item. Here's what earned our seal of approval for big parties and solo scenes alike.

TIM CHAN, SAGE ANDERSON, JOHN LONSDALE, NISHKA DHAWAN

Relax in the Pool

Funboy's latest collab with Cult Gaia is an 11-foot sloped saddle lounger with a graphic print from the fashion label along the top. A couple of guests can relax on the rose-colored floaty, making it ideal for a party of two.

Funboy x Cult Gaia Pool Lounger
FUNBOY.COM $149

Stream Anywhere

This tumbler-size projector is the best cinematic experience you'll get in your backyard, with a swiveling design and 360-degree audio that gives you flexibility.

Samsung Freestyle Portable Projector
SAMSUNG.COM
$899.99

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This official Wu-Tang Clan towel is perfect for music festivals and park hangs.

Wu-Tang Clan x Slowtide Towel
SLOWTIDE.CO $45

Have a Seat

A lightweight, comfortable chair for camping or dining. Choose from two colors, and pair it with the brand's Café Table for dinner under the stars.

Helinox Café Chair **HELINOX.COM** $169.95

Crack Open a Cold One

Keep your brew chilled with the Huski Beer Cooler. This high-tech holder is triple-insulated, corrosion-resistant, and features a leakproof design for durability. It comes with a three-in-one detachable bottle opener, too.

Huski Beer Cooler 2.0
HUSKICOOLERS.COM $24.99

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE COMPANIES

Big Sound, Small Package

With up to six hours of play time and a splash-proof design, the JBL PartyBox lets you turn up the fun. Built-in light-show and karaoke capabilities make this modern boombox a must-have.

JBL PartyBox Encore Essential JBL.COM $299.95

UNDER-WATER SOUND

Waterproof Earbuds

Bluetooth can't cut it underwater, but Zygo's bone-conduction technology lets you easily stream music in the pool so you can focus on your next lap — not your connection.

Zygo Solo Underwater Headphones
SHOPZYGO.COM $299

Bold Looks

Swimwear brand Orlebar Brown's "Club Tropicana" trunks — inspired by Eighties duo Wham! — have a bold print that'll turn heads at the beach and the club.

Orlebar Brown Swim Shorts
ORLEBARBROWN.COM
$345

Shades of Cool

Built for chilling at the beach or breaking a sweat on a run, these lightweight shades come with durable polarized lenses, comfy but secure frames, and grippy nose pads to keep them from sliding.

Oakley Leadline Sanctuary Sunglasses
OAKLEY.COM $208

SLEEK AND DURABLE

Smoke Show

If you want a pipe that doubles as postmodern decor, look no further than the Tetra Elbow. Designed by Parisian ceramicist neenineen, this twisted, tube-shaped implement keeps the smoke billows visible each time you take a puff.

TETRA ELBOW PIPE
SHOP-TETRA.COM
$70

EASY RIDER

Electric Feel

The vintage beach cruiser goes electric with this sleek and smooth-riding e-bike. But don't let its name fool you — the Around the Block can zoom up to 40 mph for 40 miles on a full charge while you sit back and enjoy the battery-powered ride.

Sixthreezero Around the Block Bike
SIXTHREEZERO.COM $1,749.99

Brew It Yourself

Forget expensive coffee-shop cold brew — fill up Asobu's mesh basket with your favorite grinds, steep in the insulated carafe, then take your iced coffee to go.

Asobu Portable Cold Brew Maker
ASOBUBOTTLE.COM $59.99

Colorful Fits

J Balvin's latest Guess collaboration is all about *amor y paz* ("peace and love"), with bright colors and prints that make you feel as good as you look.

J Balvin x Guess Collection
GUESS.COM $14 and up

LIGHT BUT STRONG

Roll 'Em Up

These lipstick-size tubes let you take your stash to go, keeping pre-rolls away from water and preventing your smokes from being crushed. Not into cannabis? They'll work as vitamin holders, too.

Edie Parker Doob Tube
EDIEPARKERFLOWER.COM $35

Return of an Icon

The classic Moke Cruiser returns with a special 007 edition timed to the 60th anniversary of the James Bond film franchise. The new Moke comes with modern updates like a backup camera, Bluetooth, and all-electric motor. Each vehicle is made to order.

Moke "60 Years of Bond" Special-Edition Cruiser
MOKEAMERICA.COM
$28,975

A NICE, MELLOW SMOKE

Apple Puffs

To celebrate George Harrison, Dad Grass' "All Things Must Grass" collection of pre-rolled joints sparks up organic CBD/CBG for a chill, mood-improving buzz.

"All Things Must Grass" CBD Pre-Rolls
DADGRASS.COM $40 (five-pack)

Cooler for the Summer

Hauling a party's worth of beer and grub just got easier, thanks to this new 18-can cooler pack. A magnetic closure and buckles keep it sealed; a sturdy base holds it upright.

Yeti Hopper M20 Backpack Cooler
YETI.COM $325

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We Are Living Through the Worst Eighties Reboot

Putin's invasion of Ukraine is bringing back Cold War anxiety – for the MTV generation, it's a nightmare that never went away

By ROB SHEFFIELD

THE PAST FEW YEARS have seen plenty of Eighties revivals. But here's one nobody wanted to see: the resurgence of Cold War anxiety. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it seemed like the end for pop culture's obsession with the threat of World War III. But with Putin's war on Ukraine, and America waking up to the idea of Russia as a nuclear threat, a specific kind of Us vs. Them dread is back from the past. And we're not equipped to handle it.

The apocalyptic imagination was on fire in the Eighties, the soundtrack to the era of *The Day After,* as the world reached the brink of getting blown up. It's weird how today you hear mega-famous tunes like "1999" or "99 Luftballons" or "The Final Countdown" without even noticing that they're explicit Eighties songs about nuclear annihilation, which people were expecting any day. Now it's easy to enjoy a movie like *Top Gun* as a kitschy little rom-com, with the cinema's most erotically charged volleyball orgy, rather than propaganda for dropping the Big One.

But in 2022, that old-school anxiety is returning, for the first time in cultural memory. Hell, there's even a *Top Gun* reboot this summer, starring Tom Cruise as Maverick, as if the volleyball never ended. It definitely hits differently than it would have a year ago. Yet Cold War-doomsday culture has always remained wildly popular, even after the context has been forgotten.

Case in point: "Crazy Train," a song that nobody today is surprised to hear at a wedding, a prom, a football game, or an SUV ad full of happy children singing along. "Crazy Train" was a bluntly obvious song about the nuclear-arms race and the helpless terror felt by even the most pampered of citizens, including rock stars. As Ozzy Osbourne sings, "Heirs of a Cold War, that's what we've become/Inheriting troubles, I'm mentally numb!" And Ozzy would much rather go numb some other way. Anyone could hear that "Crazy Train" was a rant against evil minds that plot destruction. But now it means your sister's wedding DJ is taking requests, and Uncle Tony is goin' off the rails.

It's tough to overstate how deeply the atomic threat saturated every corner of the culture in those days. So dig, if you will, the picture: As the 1980s begin, the planet is run by two superpowers basing their decisions on the assumption they'll soon be incinerating 400 million or 500 million of their citizens in a nuclear war. This is Plan A. In the USSR, the guy with his finger on the little red button is a seventysomething drunk named Leonid Brezhnev, boozing his way to his next stroke. In the USA, it's a seventysomething actor named Ronald Reagan, who announces, "Eighty percent of air pollution comes from plants and trees." These are the minds entrusted with the nuclear-launch codes. So long, farewell, *auf Wiedersehen,* good night.

Music was fixated on the question of human life after the apocalypse – what would it look like? Would it even exist? And (because this was pop music) how would that affect making out? It was there in the survivalist metal of Saxon, who told MTV they wore armor to prepare to fight for their food in the post-nuke badlands. It was there in P-Funk, who called their beat "The Bomb." It was there in even the silliest pop groups like Bow Wow Wow – their hit "Jungle Boy" was about running off to the wilderness to have frantic constant sex, because "when the city turns to rubble, big trouble!"

Cold War-doomsday culture has always remained wildly popular, even after the original context has been forgotten.

But the songs and movies stayed popular after the Cold War ended, even as the nation was eager to forget it ever happened. Now that panic is back, forcing America to confront long-cherished myths about the past, along with buried fears about the future. But the Cold War revival is a shock to the cultural imagination.

There was a hit movie a few years ago called *Yesterday,* a hugely popular rom-com about a world where the Beatles have disappeared into a memory hole, so there's only one person alive who knows their songs. When he plays a gig in Moscow, the crowd happily sings along with "Back in the U.S.S.R.," even the line "The Ukraine girls really knock me out." This scene was already beyond belief in 2019 – nobody involved knew Russia and Ukraine weren't the same country any more? Or that thousands of people had been killed fighting over it? Yet that oblivion wasn't an oddity. It was America's fantasy of the world for a long time. A fantasy where the Cold War was over and the U.S. won. A fantasy wherein America spent 30 years. But that fantasy was yesterday. ®

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ILLUSTRATION BY **Max-o-matic**

Q&A

PJ Harvey

On her surreal new novel, loving Elvis, reconsidering her early work, and the irresistible allure of darkness

By KORY GROW

IN "ORLAM," the surrealistic new novel written in poetic verse by alt-rock firebrand PJ Harvey, a nine-year-old girl named Ira, in England's Dorset region, swoons over ghosts and encounters real-life villains, all as foretold by her village's oracle, Orlam, the eviscerated eye of Ira's pet lamb. Harvey, who was once a nine-year-old Dorset girl herself, wrote the entire work in the region's dialect – rendering words like "grievance" as "engripement" and "hot" as "hetful" – which makes the whole story even stranger. (She also included a standard-English translation of the book.) It's the product of honing her writing for three years under the mentorship of Scottish poet Don Paterson. "Learning the craft of poetry writing seemed to be a very natural progression for me after having been a songwriter for a long time," she says. She's also been recording a new album, due out next summer: "It took a long time to write to get right, but at last I feel very happy with it," she adds.

Your last few projects have looked at the world at large. Why did you decide to localize this one?
With [my 2011 album] *Let England Shake,* I was so absorbed with reading war poets. Quite often poems of great beauty are describing something very violent or very ugly, and this was really intriguing to me. That was what began to get me interested in wanting to become a better poet. . . . I've always followed my instinct as a writer, and my instinct was telling me I needed to change the scale to come back down to a small scale. One person, one village, one wood – somewhere to sort of gather my energies again.

Did you grow up speaking "Dorset" in the Seventies and Eighties?
There were certain phrases that you'd hear. A phrase I remember that I used in the book was "Seeming I." *We* would say, "Well, it seems to me that this person is . . ." But instead of saying "It seems to me," they go, "Seeming I." And I remember things like "cram-it"; that's your afternoon lunch.

I appreciated the dirty words in the Dorset dialect, too, like "munter," which you wrote in a footnote meant "fugly."
Yeah [*laughs*]. I had a lot of fun writing this book. I really wanted it to be not only a book of a lot of dark and very sensitive and emotional things, but also of great humor. As you can see, I used the language to my advantage in doing that.

What attracts you to writing about "dark things," as you put it?
It's just a natural inclination to look under the surface. I'd be the person that would want to pick up the stone and see what was underneath it – not look at the beautiful stone on the surface. I've always had that curiosity. I guess not everyone has that desire. It doesn't feel dark to me.

There's a lot of folklore in this book — like, "You should not eat blackberries after September." Are you superstitious yourself?
I studied the folklore month by month, and I wrote the poems month by month. A lot of those superstitions do lodge themselves inside you, don't they? I don't know about you, but I still feel a bit worried about walking under a ladder, and breaking a mirror. All of these superstitions that grew thousands of years ago, maybe as a warning to take care.

The book has a character named Wyman-Elvis who sings "Love Me Tender." What does Elvis Presley mean to you?
Well, I loved Elvis, as a lot of children of my era did, and I still love Elvis. I love everything about him. I could lose myself in that voice, but not only that, the way he looked as well. He is almost a godlike figure in *Orlam*.

I didn't realize you were such a fan. You've never recorded Elvis covers.
Oh, I do meditate on Elvis songs to myself. I very often play his work at the piano.

Recently, a *Guardian* profile of you described you as "one-time muse of Nick Cave." Does that irk you after all these years?
That's happened all my life. It doesn't upset me in any way. And it must be hard for Nick as well, but that's just the way things are.

Over the past few years, you have released the demos to every album you've put out so far. Did that make you hear any of your songs differently?
Yeah, it was interesting. It actually made me want to go back to demo'ing on my four-track again. This last album I've just done, I literally sang in the phone; I didn't even demo it, because I didn't want to get attached to the demo versions. But then I felt like I'd missed out on an important part of the process, so it made me want to start doing that again.

On your last tour, you sang *Rid of Me*'s "50ft Queenie." How do those early songs, where you're hollering, feel to you now?
I was in my late teens, early twenties when I'd written some of those songs. At that time, it was a type of expression I needed. And things change. You get older. Not all of the songs I feel able to play anymore, as much as I love them, because I feel that I'm now an older woman that couldn't sing those words with any conviction. But "50ft Queenie" I can, because that's a character that I can imagine, and I can inhabit.

STEVE GULLICK

RollingStone

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From Hockey Goon to Psychedelics Guru

Over four years in the NHL, Riley Cote pushed his body to its limit. After his playing days, he expanded his mind

By STEVE VOLK

RILEY COTE'S journey to enlightenment began in earnest when a hulking man punched him in the face. Cote, now 40 and retired from professional hockey, remembers the moment with a dark laugh. He'd gotten into this particular bust-up one night during the 2009 season with one of the NHL's most vicious fighters, and took the worst of it, waking the next day with his left eye blackened shut.

"What," he asked himself, "am I doing?"

He drove to the Philadelphia Flyers training facility and got into the shower. Feeling congested, he reached for a tissue. He didn't realize he'd suffered a cracked sinus, so what happened next was physics. When he blew his nose, the air – rather than coming out of his nostrils – inflated his face. The pressure surged instantly behind his good eye and closed it tight.

Team trainer Derek Settlemyre heard Cote scream. "His whole face had swollen up," Settlemyre recalls. "We tell them, if they think they have a fracture, 'Don't blow your nose' – and he did."

After eight years in pro hockey (four in the NHL, four hopping around its minor-league teams), Cote felt his retirement bearing down. As an NHL "enforcer" – a player whose main role is to get into fights – he'd taken countless hits on the ice. Off it, he self-medicated with booze and drugs. He'd brutalized his body inside and out by the tender age of 28. "I damaged my brain," Cote says. "Punching it and dehydrating it and partying my ass off."

Today, Cote is a new man, with a mane of long brown hair, a yoga-trimmed physique, and an aura of ease in his own skin. It is a transformation he credits largely to psychedelic drugs. Since retiring, Cote has emerged as one of the sports world's most vocal advocates for what he calls "plant medicines" – from cannabis, itself a light psychedelic, to weightier hallucinogens including DMT and magic mushrooms – to treat post-concussion symptoms (think headaches, insomnia, depression, and possibly, the degenerative brain condition known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE). In 2017, Cote co-founded Athletes for Care, a group that promotes research into the physical and emotional health issues athletes face and novel paths for treatment. He regularly speaks at conferences on the benefits of psychedelics. And, perhaps most important, he reaches out to players who are known to be struggling post-career, even arranging magic-mushroom ceremonies where they can safely experiment with psychedelics.

Cote understands the hesitation surrounding these drugs. While psychedelics fill him with "love," "gratitude," and a "connection to a higher energy source," they are technically illegal throughout most of the U.S. Beyond that, the experience, whether good or bad, can be intense. Certain users experience not just so-called bad trips, but also psychotic breaks from reality. Cote says talking to a first-timer about using psychedelics is basically like asking them: "Do you want to see God? Are you sure?" The ask is so big, the answer is often no.

COTE WAS WORRIED when he walked into the lunch area at the Good Hope House Retreat Center in Jamaica one day in April, got a green smoothie, and waited for one of the biggest weekends of his life to unfold. An ESPN crew was coming to film a magic-mushroom ceremony he'd helped organize for a group of retired athletes, including former players from the NHL and NFL. All had pledged to eat "breakthrough" doses – enough, that is, to induce a mystical state – of mushrooms containing psilocybin, which is legal in Jamaica.

The opportunity to showcase mushrooms as medicine to a mainstream television audience was a precious thing, but as Cote sat with some early arrivals, he couldn't enjoy it. He kept mulling a more practical concern: Would everyone actually show up? Two people in particular – Steve Downie, an ex-Flyers teammate, and Justin Renfrow, a former NFL lineman – were due any minute. Or not. In the past 11 years, Cote has invited a lot of people to venture down the magic-mushroom path, and most who say yes subsequently run into excuses not to follow through. In fact, second-thought declinations are so common in Cote's experience that he doesn't judge anyone for them.

"It's scary, right?" Cote says. "There's a fear associated with it. There's a lot of unknowns, like, 'Where am I going? What am I getting myself into?' It all sounds grand when you're sitting on your couch, you know, and talking about it via text or phone. But when you've actually got to be committed to something and actually do it, it's another story."

There is some irony here. Since Cote began proselytizing, scientific research bolstering the case for psychedelics has accumulated. Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore established a center for psychedelic and consciousness research in 2019, and has published 50 peer-reviewed papers that indicate psychedelics help treat depression, promote psychological insight, alleviate anxiety in cancer patients, break smoking addiction, and improve overall life satisfaction. In 2018, the Food and Drug Administration, which had for decades held the line against psy-

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STEVE VOLK *wrote about racism in policing in the May 2021 issue.*

CENTERED ICE
Cote advocates for psychedelics to treat the effects of traumatic brain injury.

JIM TROCCHIO

chedelics, granted "breakthrough therapy" status to psilocybin use for severe depression, an act designed to accelerate the drug development and review process. MDMA, better known as the club drug Ecstasy, also won breakthrough status, and could receive full approval to treat post-traumatic stress disorder next year.

At the same time, the discovery of CTE has created a crisis across all contact sports, linked to myriad symptoms, including memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, impulse-control problems, aggression, depression, anxiety, suicidality, and progressive dementia. The condition can only be confirmed after death, but the list of the dead with CTE is long, including four soccer players, more than 300 NFL players, and at least a dozen high-profile hockey players: Stan Mikita, Bob Probert, Derek Boogaard, Jeff Parker, Wade Belak, Larry Zeidel, Reggie Fleming, Rick Martin, Steve Montador, Zarley Zalapski, Todd Ewen, and Dan Maloney.

Dr. Julie Holland, a practicing New York psychiatrist and psychedelics expert, says the application of psychedelics to sports medicine is new, but makes sense based on the current scientific literature. "We know that many psychedelics have really potent anti-inflammatory effects," says Holland, who is also a longtime medical adviser for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS. "The other thing is, they're being explored for treating neurodegenerative disorders, including chronic traumatic encephalopathy. These athletes that get multiple blows to the head [represent] a case where you really need not only anti-inflammatory effects, but this purported neuroplasticity that comes with psychedelics."

Studies largely involving rodents suggest that psychedelics reduce neuroinflammation, a key component of both Alzheimer's disease and CTE; produce healing from brain injury; and possibly even prompt neurogenesis, or the birth of new neurons. They have also been shown to increase the density of dendritic spines – small protrusions found on nerve cells – in turn spurring the growth of neuronal connections that can be lost in cases of chronic stress or depression. Some human experiments suggest that psychedelics reduce activity in the default mode network (DMN), a web of connected brain regions responsible for self-awareness, social thinking, and thoughts about the past and future. The mystic feelings that users like Cote report – such as the loss of a sense of self, and the ability to set aside the past or think afresh about the future – are thought to arise from this reset of the DMN.

Cote started Athletes for Care with such edgier therapies in mind – initially just cannabis, and then psychedelics as the encouraging science grew. And while he might not be the group's most famous retiree (members include former NFL star running backs Tiki Barber and Chris Johnson, and former UFC champ "Bas" Rutten), he looms as perhaps its most pivotal figure. He is a partner in a hemp-derived CBD recovery product line called BodyChek Wellness and an adviser to Wake, a multi-pronged company that is collaborating with Baltimore's Lieber Institute for Brain Medicine to use genetics research to develop psilocybin-based treatments tailored to individual patients – a potentially dramatic step toward eliminating "bad" or ineffective trips. At AFC's most recent board meeting, in March, Cote led a deep discussion around psychedelics, presenting the current body of research and urging the group to strengthen its commitment to incorporate psychedelics into its work.

"Riley has been a leader in this space for a long, long time," says Marvin

Washington, a former NFL defensive lineman, who won a Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos in the late Nineties and became a pro-cannabis activist in retirement. "He was the first athlete I ever heard talking about psychedelics."

The pair were at a cannabis-related conference several years ago when Cote waxed on about the mental-health benefits associated with taking both small and reality-shifting doses of psilocybin. Washington was surprised and started checking out Cote's claims. "He was right," he says. "He deserves a lot of credit for being in so early on all plant medicines."

IN HIS EARLY DAYS playing hockey, as a teenager, Cote discovered that a bong hit in the morning helped him maintain his focus through a long workout. Later, after his skill set proved unequal to becoming a scorer, he remodeled himself as an "enforcer," or goon, a hockey player whose main job is to punish opponents for any penalties the referee missed. Undersized for the role at six feet one and a playing weight of 220 pounds, Cote brawled his way into the league, racking up more than 200 professional hockey fights. He increased his cannabis use then, smoking weed on a regular basis and finding that it helped him sleep, recover, and manage the anxiety and trauma of bare-knuckle fighting. Magic mushrooms, when he took them, were more of a party drug, a way to enhance the lights and music at a concert.

Cote's delivery while retelling his own journey is understated. But his presence speaks loudly. His face is rugged, with a nose that moves this way and that, like a switchback trail, to suggest his past. His hands are gnarled. By the time he retired, he had accumulated a litany of injuries: torn ligaments in both knees, a dislocated finger, broken ankle, separated shoulder, three broken noses, and at least four diagnosed concussions. Cote knew back then that he needed to heal up, and intuitively wanted to build on his past experiences with cannabis and psychedelics. So he began reading deeply, discovering that cannabis and psychedelics bore rich histories as natural medicines.

Cote also did as he learned, securing five grams of mushrooms, or what's known as a "heroic dose," for his first ceremonial trip. He set an intention to treat the experience as important, even sacred, and arranged his house for the occasion, putting on some ambient music, turning off the electric lights, and setting out a couple of candles. Still, nothing he'd read or done truly prepared him.

Acknowledging the experience was "ineffable, indescribable," Cote reaches for language, doing his best. It was, he says, bliss, and an incredible sense of knowing. Eventually, he lands on something particularly hard to explain to potential initiates: "I felt my ego dissolve."

This specific result suggests an additional, perhaps unexpected use for psychedelics that might be uniquely valuable to athletes: "For a lot of athletes, and these could be amateurs or professionals," says Cote, "everything you do from a very young age is geared toward achieving success in that sport. It becomes your identity."

In Cote's case, the identity he'd spent so long forging for himself with blood and terror, "jacking up" his emotions to punch people he didn't hate and often admired, lifted off his shoulders during that first trip like he was "shedding his skin" with no more importance or difficulty than he'd remove a coat. "I felt . . . free," he says.

"It's scary, right? There's a fear associated with [these drugs], a lot of unknowns, like, 'What am I getting myself into?' It all sounds grand when you're talking about it. But when you've got to actually do it, it's another story."

What Cote experienced was actually a typical effect reported by users, and left him feeling like he could set hockey aside to "do whatever I wanted." He spent the next several years banging away at his new cause, eventually finding a high-profile supporter in Lindy Snider, former vice president for sales with the Flyers and daughter of the team's beloved late owner, Ed Snider. Cote called her and asked for a meeting, Snider says, and came in quoting the science as it stood at the time. She was impressed.

"He's by far one of the leading voices in sports around these issues," Snider says. "And the athletes he's brought into Athletes for Care are all very similar. They've run the gauntlet in the physical realm like nobody else. And, you know, there's associated deeper meaning with looking at all of these alternative ways to ameliorate your health, your mental wellness, your state of being, and Riley is always looking at a higher state of being. Whatever those tools look like that help us get there is what his mission is."

Snider was open to cannabis. She ran a skin-care company that made products for cancer patients and knew of the drug's potential as medicine. She also helped get her father some cannabis for relief as he lay dying in 2016. But the evolution of Cote's story has educated her, helping her see that psychedelics, too, bear importance not just in the treatment of brain injury and CTE, but also to help former athletes lead productive, enjoyable post-career lives.

Within the Flyers family, Snider says, she had too often witnessed players suffer a "failure to launch" after retirement. She sadly recalls one player she declines to name who felt so lost after hockey he succumbed to alcoholism and died of liver failure. "I felt we failed him," Snider says. "And it was this notion that there were things that could have helped him, and he didn't have access to this stuff."

It is easy to imagine that athletes would prove particularly challenging to invite on this kind of a trip, the hippie-dippy side of the experience too off-putting for people so deeply task-oriented and rooted in their physical bodies. But Cote says they are no more resistant on that front than anyone else. "The spiritual side of this is always more difficult to address, in general," he explains. "That's the world we're living in." Still, he routinely pitches the physical benefits as his way in, and finds retired sports stars uniquely receptive. "Elite athletes are always looking for the next best thing and how to optimize their performance," he says. "The average Joe in the Western world doesn't give a shit about optimization. They don't even know what that word means. They don't understand there's higher levels of performance. So they just think that wherever they're at, that's just the hand that God dealt them."

Washington, the retired NFL player and cannabis activist, tried psilocybin after listening to Cote talk about it. He now describes it as the "next moonshot" beyond cannabis legalization. He also credits the drug with helping him find a sense of himself "far greater than football."

ONE OF COTE'S biggest success stories might be retired NHL star and two-time Stanley Cup champion Daniel Carcillo. Nine years of pro hockey had left Carcillo suffering from light sensitivity, headaches, insomnia, anxiety, depression, slurred speech, suicidal ideation, and more. He was public about it, speaking out toward the end of his career, in 2015, about his concussion history, hockey's disregard for players' health, and his own failed attempts to find some solution in modern medicine.

After Carcillo retired, Cote says he reached out to him for more than a year about trying cannabis and psilocybin. No luck. It was only when Carcillo reached his darkest point, and started thinking about how he might get a rope around the big wood beams in his ceiling, that "desperation," as he describes it, drove him to meet with Cote and learn more.

Cote made arrangements for Carcillo to attend a mushroom ceremony in Colorado, a decriminalized state. That first experience, says Carcillo, included the spiritual sensations that psilocybin induces – and something more. A few days later, Carcillo realized that he could start crossing off symptoms: light sensitivity, slurred speech, his suicidal feelings giving way to hope.

Carcillo came home from Colorado and started taking microdoses of psilocybin and occasional breakthrough amounts. He started to enjoy that sense of rebirth that Cote, Washington, and so many others describe. Soon, he was in the news, crediting Cote with "saving my life."

In May 2020, Carcillo founded Wesana, a startup trying to develop its own psilocybin treatment and earn FDA approval. He is, perhaps out of necessity, more buttoned up than Cote. "In the space that Riley's in," Carcillo says, "you can talk more freely about what this does for the spirit. For me, when you go down the FDA path, they don't care about that. Like, they don't want to hear that." In fact, Carcillo says, he no longer uses words like "psychedelic" at all in his work. "I say it's a compound found in nature. Most all of our medicines are a single extract from a plant found in nature, or fungi. That's the reality."

The effects of that "compound" on his psyche have been profound: "This medicine, the biggest stuff that it does . . . there is always that feeling that you are enough. And one of the things

that I'm really interested in is showing people not only can we recover and be a beacon of hope, but you can break out of what you think you need to stay in and do new things."

In science, a story like Carcillo's might be dismissed as only an anecdote. But his recovery is seemingly validated through brain scans. The images Carcillo received from neurologists before he tried psilocybin showed a brain suffering from decreased connectivity. Big pockets of red signified areas of the brain that weren't communicating. His slurred speech was a by-product – the signals from one part of his brain having to travel around these red areas, a slowdown that affected his enunciation. According to Mark Wingertzahn, Wesana's chief scientific officer, those initial scans qualified Carcillo for a diagnosis of moderate traumatic brain injury.

After he'd come home, however, and continued his own ad hoc psilocybin therapy for about six months, Carcillo got another set of scans. "What [doctors] were able to see is, those areas of red may have gone down to blue, or in some cases white, which is consistent with that normal brain pattern," says Wingertzahn, meaning Carcillo's brain was suddenly showing greater connectivity and function. What interested Wingertzahn most, though, was what happened to Carcillo's symptoms, which the former hockey player says have been reduced, on a scale from one to 10, to a number not even on the menu: "Zero."

The reduction of symptoms is what the FDA does care about, says Wingertzahn, who spent 25 years at pharma companies, including Pfizer, getting new drugs to market. He thinks psilocybin-based medicines will be approved in three to five years.

Human trials have shown significant success in the areas of depression, death anxiety, smoking cessation, positive personality changes, and more. Not only that, a pair of studies have suggested that psilocybin treats depression at rates at least equal to, and by some measures much better than, today's available meds – along with a whole different class of side effects.

Listed side effects for drugs like Lexapro include nausea, sleepiness, weakness, dizziness, anxiety, trouble sleeping, delayed ejaculation, painful erections, difficulty with orgasms, sweating, shaking, reduced appetite, and dry mouth. Noted side effects of psychedelics, aside from that small number who experience a psychotic break, and the occasional bout of nausea or insomnia, include joy, calm, increased awareness, self-confidence, and a sometimes obnoxious desire to tell everybody you meet about your awesome fucking experience.

Carcillo, during a Zoom call, smiles and asks: "Are you interested in something like that?" It's the same question, essentially, Cote has been asking for years – the seemingly obvious answer left hanging in the air.

CHANGED MEN Clockwise from left: Cote in his playing days; Justin Renfrow; Cote today (left), with former teammate Steve Downie at a mushroom retreat in Jamaica. Downie and Renfrow both had life-changing experiences on their first trip.

IN THE DAYS before Cote left for Jamaica, a few of the people scheduled to come canceled, including the former offensive lineman Justin Renfrow.

"I was trying to make a lot of excuses," says Renfrow, who has a lot in common with Cote, having made it to the pros as an undrafted free agent and carved out a difficult career bouncing between NFL squads and the Canadian Football League. "I played football injured since my sophomore year of high school," he says, explaining that the grind slowly took its toll.

The journeyman tackle told Cote he wasn't going to make it to the retreat, then secretly asked the universe for a sign. The night before the scheduled trip, he got one: a text message from Wake, the psilocybin research company, delivered at 11:11, a time his family had always invested with mystical meaning. He felt it was his deceased grandmother encouraging him to go.

Cote's old teammate Downie, meanwhile, said yes to Jamaica, and then complained that he did not have a valid passport, so he would not be able to travel. Cote talked him through that episode. Still, he couldn't be sure either of them would actually get on the plane.

Khara Cartagena, vice president of business development with the Spore Group, one of many startups across the country prepping for the Wild West of psychedelic legalization, was sitting with Cote as he waited to see if Downie and Renfrow would arrive.

"I could see he was distracted," says Cartagena. "He was clear that it meant a lot to him to help these people."

But eventually, after an anxious several minutes, Cote lit up at the appearance of Renfrow. And again when he saw a figure he thought he could recognize at a distance – the height just about right, the shape in silhouette familiar, until finally the man got close enough that Cote could see the trademark missing tooth in his smile: Steve Downie, Cote's old teammate.

"It was all just really beautiful," says Cote. "I shouldn't be surprised. Plant medicine delivers, you know. But it was really maybe even better than I expected."

Both men were moved by their magic-mushroom experiences. Downie teared up after his first dose, and spoke during a subsequent integration session – held to help people process the intense experience – about how his father had died in a car accident while taking him to hockey practice. The ceremony had given Downie an incredible sense of relief.

Perhaps the most powerful moment, though, came when Cote looked at Renfrow deep into the ceremony. Renfrow had spoken to Cote beforehand about his personal uncertainty: Should he continue playing in the CFL, or pursue his passion for the YouTube food show he's created, *What's Cooking*, and try to grow it? A hulking man at six feet five and 320 pounds, Renfrow was wearing a T-shirt with his initials on it in a circle. Then, methodically, he took it off. Cote felt he was watching a peace settle over the big man as it had once settled over him: a shedding of the skin and the birth of someone new.

Renfrow, in a tearful interview after the trip, confirms Cote's observation: "It felt like my grandma was taking that weight," the pain and stress of playing through all those injuries, he says. "I didn't need to keep going through that." He emerged knowing that he could leave football behind.

Cote, for his part, says that bringing people like Renfrow this kind of existential healing is his calling now, and he marvels at the dichotomy between the "old Riley" and the new. In Flyers-related photos, his eyes are often filled with terror, bestial anger, and sadness. Now, he says, "here I am talking about a flower."

He laughs.

"It's been an incredible journey," he says, "and really, I just want to take as many people with me as possible."

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JEFF VINNICK/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES; BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF RILEY COTE

Planet Hunger

Putin – and greedy CEOs – are already putting 20 million people on the brink of starvation. If we don't make big changes now, we will face a global food crisis

By JEFF GOODELL

WITHOUT ENOUGH FOOD, there is only hunger, chaos, and violence. Russian President Vladimir Putin not only knows this better than anyone, he has also weaponized it. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he has deliberately disrupted the country's wheat supply, triggering a global food crisis. Ukraine is the sixth-largest exporter of wheat in the world, and – by blockading Ukrainian ports, blowing up rail lines, stealing grain, and killing farmers – Putin has effectively taken about 20 million tons of wheat off the market. Global wheat production is about 850 million tons, so this is hardly enough to cause a global famine. But it is enough to cause the price of wheat to jump more than 60 percent already this year. In the U.S., where the average American spends less than 10 percent of their income on food, this will hardly be noticeable. But for people in the developing world, many of whom spend 40 percent or more of their income on food, that could mean the difference between eating and going hungry. High food prices have already had a devastating impact in poor nations, pushing 20 million people into starvation in sub-Saharan Africa alone, and sparking riots in Sri Lanka.

This crisis, however, is in some sense artificial, given that it is not driven by any actual shortage of food in the world. Even with the Ukrainian wheat off the market, there is still plenty of grain to go around. The issue is all about how much it costs and how it is distributed. And Putin is not the only one who is exploiting this situation. Commodity traders make money off wild price swings, shippers make money off people desperate for grain, fertilizer manufacturers make money off farmers desperate to maximize their yields, and proto-fascist politicians are happy to exploit rising food prices as evidence of the failure of democracy.

FEED THE WORLD
The U.S. could end world hunger and become the Saudi Arabia of food, if it shifted agricultural policies.

Behind the immediate food panic, however, a much bigger and more worrisome crisis looms. "The war in Ukraine has shown how fragile the food system is," says Thomas Jonas, the CEO and co-founder of Nature's Fynd, a company that uses fungi to make meat and dairy substitutes. Simply put, the way we grow and distribute food is deeply fucked up. More than 40 percent of the food grown in America is wasted, the majority left to rot and the remainder tossed out by finicky consumers who decided they didn't like the sauce on their pasta. Here in the U.S., we use hundreds of millions of tons of corn and soybeans to make fuel for gas-guzzling cars and trucks. We slaughter animals in factory farms that are both inhumane and breeding grounds for pathogens and bacteria. Fertilizer

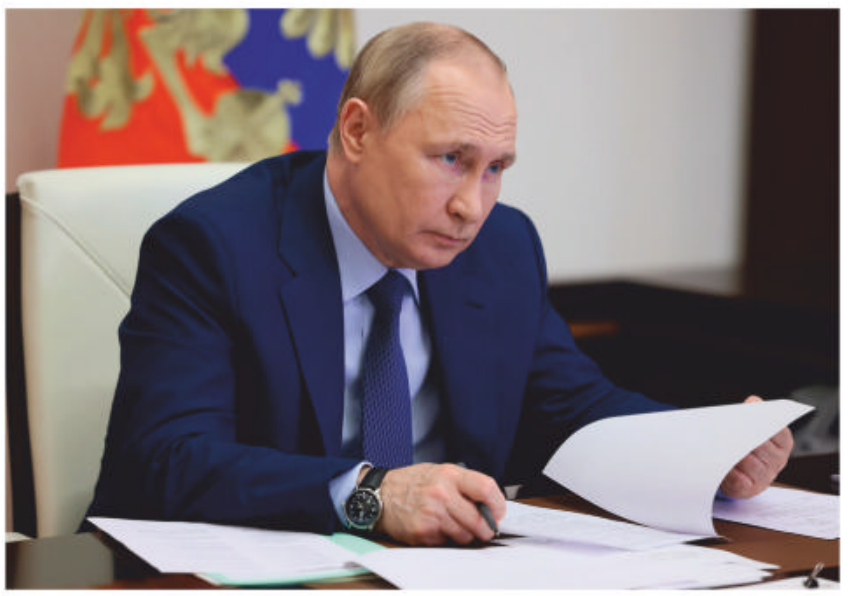
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY "ROLLING STONE". PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASHLEY GILBERTSON/VII/REDUX

runoff clogs rivers and lakes with nutrients, producing algae blooms and aquatic "dead zones." In the western U.S., aquifers are being drained to irrigate water-intensive crops like rice and almonds. In northern India, one of the prime food-growing regions of the country, groundwater is being pumped out so fast that the water table is falling by about three feet a year.

And now it's about to get a whole lot worse. For one thing, the world population is projected to grow from 7.9 billion today to nearly 10 billion by the end of the century. To meet the expected demand for food by midcentury alone, global agricultural output will have to rise by more than 50 percent. How is that gonna work? The World Resources Institute took a hard look at the way things are going, and estimated that it would require clearing at least 1.5 billion acres of forests, savannas, and wetlands for new farmland, an area nearly twice the size of India. Meanwhile, food productivity is already in decline due to rising temperatures and extreme weather. One recent Columbia University-led study found that crop production today is 21 percent lower than it would have been without climate change. Another study, in *Nature Food,* projects that an alarming decline in staple crops like corn and rice – which, along with wheat, provide half the world's calories from plants – may begin as early as 2040. As Donald Ort, a professor of plant biology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, put it to me recently, "The largest single global change that threatens food security is high temperature."

In this sense, Putin represents a danger to the world that is far greater than an immediate spike in wheat prices. Putin's empire is financed by Russia's vast reserves of oil and gas, which are the main reason why the planet is warming so quickly. And a hotter world is a hungrier world. "Putin is a chaos agent," says Ruth Ben-Ghiat, author of *Strongmen: From Mussolini to the Present*. And nothing says chaos quite like millions of hungry people on a rapidly warming planet.

The tragedy is, it doesn't have to be this way. America is the Saudi Arabia of food. We could cure world hunger in six months if we wanted to. But our food system is not engineered for the greatest good. It is engineered for the greatest good of those who control the food supply. Or, as Oxfam's director in Somalia, Senait Gebregziabher, once put it: "Famines are not natural phenomena, they are catastrophic political failures."



CHAOS AGENT Putin's war in Ukraine has disrupted grain supplies, causing shortages from Lebanon to Sri Lanka. Using the threat of a global food crisis and mass migration is a deliberate aspect of Russian strategy.

MIKHAIL METZEL/KREMLIN POOL PHOTO/AP IMAGES

UKRAINE HAS SOME of the richest soil in the world. It is dark, aerated loam full of worms and bacteria that make crops happy. Farmers have been growing wheat there for centuries, and shipping it around the world via the Black Sea ports. As a result, the region has long been coveted by Russian leaders. In 1768, Russian tsarina Catherine II sent more than 100,000 Russian troops into what is now Ukraine. Her goal: to capture the region and use control of wheat to dominate Europe. "Odessa became a grain-exporting boomtown and made the tsars who followed Catherine and their landowning nobility rich," writes historian Scott Reynolds Nelson in *Oceans of Grain,* a new book about how the wheat trade shaped the world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became an independent state and grain exports boomed. In 2021, Ukraine accounted for nine percent of world wheat trade. Much of the grain goes to poor countries in the developing world. For example, Eritrea gets nearly half of its wheat imports from Ukraine. Lebanon gets 70 percent. And whatever wheat these countries don't get from Ukraine, they get from Russia, which has become the largest exporter of wheat in the world.

The one lesson that Putin absorbed from Russia's long struggle for control of the Ukrainian wheat fields is that whoever controls the wheat fields controls the stability of Europe and, by extension, much of the Western world. That was true in the 18th century, and it's true today. The corporatization of the world's food supply and the increasing dependence on processed food mean the demand for wheat has been rising steadily. Bread, noodles, pasta, cookies, crackers – they require the unique gluten qualities of wheat. Wheat is the fuel for our fast-food planet.

When Russia's invasion began, the Ukrainian wheat fields were one of Putin's first targets. Russian troops occupied farms, destroyed machinery, and blockaded ports where grain was shipped. Putin and his cronies were not coy about their intentions. Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council, said in April on Telegram that food is the Kremlin's "silent but menacing" weapon. "We will not deliver our products and agricultural products to our adversaries," Medvedev said. Or to put it another way: You can join us, or you can starve.

Ukrainian farmers have not given up. As the bullets fly around them, many of them are still at work in the fields, wearing armored vests and plowing around bomb craters, struggling to get seeds in the ground. But for Putin, the blockades and the interruptions of grain shipments have already had the intended effect, causing price spikes in developing nations that depend on Ukrainian wheat and sparking wider fears about a global food crisis. U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said that Ukraine-related shortages could help "tip tens of millions of people over the edge into food insecurity." The result could be "malnutrition, mass hunger, and famine in a crisis that could last for years."

Food prices and inflation have already contributed to riots and protests in Indonesia, Pakistan, Peru, and Lebanon. In Sri Lanka, scarce food, combined with price increases, blackouts, and gas shortages, led to mobs in the streets and calls for political change. In Iran, violent protests erupted after the government raised the prices of bread, cooking oil, and dairy products. Iranians' situation is made worse by tough U.S. sanctions and a tyrannical, corrupt clerical regime. If living standards continue to fall, there could be a revolution similar to the aborted uprising of 2017-18.

For Putin, this is all good news. Chaos and hunger give him leverage against less-corrupt leaders who can't stomach starving children for political gain. As Ruediger von Fritsch, a former German ambassador to Moscow, told *Der Tagesspiegel*: "Putin is hoping that disruption of grain supplies will lead to a migration crisis with starving people fleeing to Europe. This will destabilize the EU and push them to soften sanctions on Russia."

It doesn't help that the food system is ripe for Putin-style disruption. Exhibit A: the commodity traders who pumped up food prices that led to the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010 and 2011. Wheat, corn, rice, and other basic foods are priced and sold as commodities on global markets, no different from oil or gas. And while big producers and consumers use long-term contracts to buy and sell commodities, traders are more active on spot markets, and thus capable of driving short-term price spikes. In the book *The World for Sale: Money, Power and the Traders Who Barter the Earth's Resources,* authors Javier Blas and Jack Farchy suggest that in 2010, Glencore, a big commodity and trading company, used information it had to hype up fears of a grain shortage and prod the Russians into imposing an export ban on wheat. The Russians obliged, and the price of wheat skyrocketed. What Glencore failed to disclose, however, is that the company had bought up corn and wheat futures, putting itself in a position to profit from the jump in prices it had helped manipulate. "Between June 2010 and February 2011, the price of wheat more than doubled," Blas and Farchy write. "Glencore was perfectly positioned to profit from the crisis it had played a role in stirring up. The company's agricultural trading unit reported earnings of $659 million in 2010, the best year it ever had and well above the earnings of Glencore's oil and coal traders combined."

It's one thing to make a little money in a shady commodities deal. But this shady commodities deal had big reverberations. Rising food prices in 2010 and 2011 ignited protests that swept dictators from power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, and a protest movement in Syria spiraled into one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts in the region's history. Rising food prices may not have caused all this chaos, but as Putin well knows, it was certainly a big part of the equation.

ON THE HIGH PLAINS of Montana, the rows of green winter wheat growing in the parched brown fields look like rows of money. Here, the food panic feels a lot like a gold rush. This is a global tragedy, to be sure, but if you have wheat coming up out of the ground, there is money to be made.

In places like Big Sandy, at the foot of the Bear Paw Mountains, where Montana wheat grows best, the green fields of winter wheat are still a few weeks from harvesting. Meanwhile, the spring wheat planting has already begun. Everywhere you go, you see tractors crisscrossing the fields, dust billowing behind them, pulling the machines that push the wheat seeds into the ground.

On a recent Sunday morning, one of those tractors is being driven by Montana Sen. Jon Tester. He is one of the only working farmers in Congress, and his family has been working these same fields on the high plains for 110 years. His farm covers 1,800 acres, on the small side for Montana. He works it mostly himself, with help from his wife, Sharla, and his son, Shon. Most every Thursday evening, he flies from Washington, D.C., to Montana, works in the fields through the weekend, then flies back to D.C. on Monday morning.

WIDESPREAD HUNGER Above: Grain shortages in Africa are partly caused by extreme heat brought on by the climate crisis. Left: Lebanon, once the breadbasket of the Middle East, now imports much of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine — the war has led to bread lines and shortages.

At about noon, Tester pulls his tractor over, and he and I sit in the middle of the wheat field and talk about what it means to be a Montana wheat farmer in the middle of a global food freakout. He is a rough-looking man, with a Fifties-style flattop haircut and three fingers missing from his left hand, from a nasty encounter with a meat grinder when he was nine years old. He is wearing a raggy gray sweatshirt that says "Hellgate" across the front, and worn leather boots.

The high price of wheat is nice, Tester says, but the price of diesel and equipment is rising fast too, so it doesn't feel like much of a gold rush. "In the short term, it's great," he explains. "In the long term, it's bad. Long term, wheat prices drop off and equipment prices stay up." He calls Putin "a complete buffoon," and he is worried about hunger causing political chaos, which plays into Putin's hands. "When you've got hungry people," he says, in a masterpiece of understatement, "that's never good."

But what he's really worried about is rain. Last year, Tester says, was the worst year his family has seen on the farm since at least the 1940s, thanks to drought and weird hailstorms, and an invasion of grasshoppers that ate everything. And this year, Tester is worried that it will be just as bad. The region is in extreme drought again. In fact, he is worried about more than that. He is worried that something has fundamentally changed in the climate of Montana, that the days of growing food on this high-plains desert are coming to an end. In that sense, this global food crisis is just the beginning of hard times to come. "Montana wheat fields can feed the world," he says, watching a pair of antelope grazing on his wheat in the distance. "But to do that, we need a little rain."

Contributing editor JEFF GOODELL *wrote about 10 ways to save the planet in the April issue.*

THE BEST EVIDENCE of how fucked up our food system is sits in the gas tank of your car. Roughly 10 percent of the fuel in your tank is ethanol distilled from corn, which is blended into gasoline at refineries on the theory that it is cleaner than gas and helps the U.S. reduce our dependence on oil imported from the Middle East. In fact, turning corn into fuel is one of the great political scams of our time, one that has been supported by every president for the past 30 years (most of whom have, not coincidentally, taken money from ethanol companies), and that demonstrates that the wrath of SUV-driving voters upset by high gas prices is far more terrifying for American politicians than the silent suffering of people who can't afford to feed their children.

Here is the problem: Converting corn to fuel is tremendously inefficient use of land that could be better devoted to other purposes – like growing food to feed hungry people. In fact, the U.S. and Europe could immediately replace the lost grain exports from Ukraine's breadbasket by cutting their biofuel production in half. In the U.S., 38 million acres of land – an area larger than Illinois – are devoted to growing corn to help fill the gas tanks of SUVs. By comparison, grain and vegetable crops take up about twice that amount of farmland. You could feed 150 million people on the land that the U.S. devotes to corn-ethanol production. "It doesn't make any sense," Tester says. "The history books probably won't be very kind to us for taking food and putting it into oil."

Ethanol was first touted by President Jimmy Carter as part of the solution to the energy crisis of the 1970s. It was formalized with the Energy Policy Act of 2005, which created a Renewable Fuel Standard, which now mandates that 15 billion gallons of ethanol be blended into fuels each year. This spring, as fuel prices spiked, President Biden turned to ethanol once again, upping the limit of ethanol that can be mixed into gasoline from 10 to 15 percent, in a desperate attempt to show he was taking action to fight high gas prices without doing anything that would inconvenience the drivers of gas guzzlers.

The insanity of the corn-ethanol scam has been clear for a long time. And while the political power of the corn lobby is largely responsible for it, they have been aided and abetted by venture capitalists and entrepreneurs eager to sell the idea that growing fuel on farmland was a revolutionary idea. "Corn ethanol is just a platform, the first step in a much larger transition we are undergoing from a hydrocarbon-based economy to a carbohydrate-based economy," Silicon Valley venture

FROM TOP: BRIAN INGANGA/AP IMAGES; MOHAMED AZAKIR/REUTERS/ALAMY

capitalist Vinod Khosla told me 15 years ago, sitting in his posh office in the hills above Palo Alto. Next-generation corn-ethanol plants, Khosla argued, would be much more efficient and environmentally friendly. He pointed to a company called E3 BioFuels that just opened an ethanol plant in Mead, Nebraska. The facility ran largely on biogas made from cow manure, and fed leftover grain back to the cows, making it a "closed-loop system" – one that requires very few fossil fuels to create ethanol.

But the endeavor was over before it ever began. The company never recovered from an explosion early on in its operation. E3 Biofuels declared bankruptcy just months after we talked. A company called AltEn reopened the plant in 2015, this time using corn seeds to make ethanol. But it turns out nearly all seeds used in industrial agriculture in the U.S. are covered with pesticides, which polluted the air and water in the region. The plant shut down in 2021, but left behind a toxic nightmare. Bees are dying, people are sick, and residents of Mead are locked in an epic battle to clean up the mess. "There's no punishment," one Mead resident told *Grist*. "They just get away with it." (The company did not respond to requests for comment.)

In Europe, renewable mandates have had even more perverse effects. For years, fuel producers have received special credits for biofuels, including imported palm oil. The consequences have been both predictable and devastating: In Indonesia and Malaysia, millions of acres of rainforest have been clear-cut and turned into palm-oil plantations. Now, the EU is seeking to implement new policies that will accelerate this trend and promise as much as 20 percent of the continent's farmland to growing crops for fuel. The result is likely to be more deforestation, higher carbon emissions, and higher food prices. As writer Michael Grunwald puts it, "The only thing most biofuels do well is funnel extra cash to farmers."

Cash, in fact, is the real crop for most farmers in the developed world. "Farming's not *The Grapes of Wrath*," says Vince Smith, an agricultural economist at Montana State University. "Farmers in Montana are typically managing $7 or $8 million of assets on the farm." Big farms mean big lobbies that push for subsidies that support commodity crops, like corn and wheat and soybeans, that are grown at massive scale. In 88 countries, governments provide $540 billion a year in agricultural support. In the U.S., Smith explains, subsidies are doled out on a per-acre basis, which means the bigger your farm, the more help you get. According to Smith, 50 percent of all subsidies go to the largest 10 percent of farms. Twenty percent go to the largest one percent of farms. "If you're a small farm in Mississippi operated by African American producers," Smith says, "you get very little at all."

THE RISK TO FOOD SECURITY from rising heat begins with basic physics and biology. Like humans, plants live in their own Goldilocks zone. They respond to temperature just like humans do. Except they can't crank up the A/C if it gets too hot. Yes, plants can move to more suitable climates over time, especially those that regenerate by seeds that blow in the wind or get dispersed by birds. Given enough time, entire forests can migrate to cooler climates. But individual plants, once they take root, are stuck. If it gets too hot, they are in trouble.

Heat increases the metabolism of plants, just like it does in humans. It raises their heart rate, in effect. And that speeds up everything, including the need for water. Plants are between 80 and 95 percent water (humans, in contrast, are 55 to 60 percent water). Water is key for all basic functions, including photosynthesis. Some plants are more efficient than others in dealing with limited water, but the water-heat relationship is absolute: The hotter it gets, the more water they need. "Plants are water-pumping machines," one biologist tells me.

When it gets hot, plants do more or less what humans do – they sweat (in plants, it's called evapotranspiration). Instead of sweat glands, plants have tiny openings in the underside of their leaves that release water vapor, similar to pores in human skin. A mature house plant, for example, can transpire its weight in water every day (if humans sweat that much, we'd have to drink 20 gallons of water a day). Even small changes in temperature mean big changes in sweat. "To get a sense of how important temperature is, if you go from 25 to 35 Celsius, you more than double the amount of water needed to maintain a given level of growth," says David Lobell, an agricultural ecologist at Stanford University. Because of how fast it grows, corn is a particularly big sweater. A single acre of corn in Iowa can sweat about 4,000 gallons a day – enough to fill a residential swimming pool in less than four days.

"[Ethanol] doesn't make any sense," Sen. Tester says of the 38 million acres of fields in the U.S. used to grow corn for gas. "The history books probably won't be very kind to us for taking food and putting it into oil."

Heat impacts plants in other ways. It changes the timing of blooms, which can put them out of sync with pollinators. Rising heat makes plants more vulnerable to afflictions like Aspergillus flavus, a fungi that produces a poison that can kill you with one bite. As heat rises, arsenic is sucked up out of the soil by the roots of rice plants, making the rice toxic. Heat also amps up the life cycle of pests that attack many plants. Instead of maturing in 28 days, caterpillars might mature in, say, 21 days. More rapid maturity means more generations of pests in a season, amplifying the damage they can do.

The solutions to creating more heat-tolerant crops is not as simple as it might seem. After all, scientists have tools now that allow them to cut and paste DNA as easily as I can cut and paste the words on this page. You might think that if we can put the proverbial fish gene in a tomato to keep it from freezing, then someone can insert a cactus gene in corn to allow it to withstand extreme heat. But heat-resistance is not a trait, like blue eyes or the color of a flower petal. "Understanding how heat impacts plants is like trying to understand how the body responds to Covid," Meng Chen, a plant-biology professor at UC Riverside who is working on how plants sense and respond to fluctuations in temperature, tells me. "Understanding it means understanding everything about how a plant lives and grows, because temperature affects virtually every aspect of a plant's life."

Alexis Racelis, an associate professor of agroecology at University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley, is skeptical about genetically manipulated plants for a different reason: Even if they can work and solve heat-related problems, the seeds of the modified crops will be locked up by big seed companies, furthering the corporate control of farmers and our food supply. "Even if the seed companies come up with some kind of breakthrough, it is not going to help the people in the developing world, where they are starving," Racelis tells me.

Other researchers are exploring the genetic diversity acquired in thousands of years of domestication. Corn, for example, evolved in a hot place (southwest Mexico). There is surely some sequence of genes that makes some varieties of corn more resilient to heat than others – but how do you find them? "We can find genes for simple traits, but for anything complicated like yield or heat tolerance, it's just not going to happen," says Seth Murray, a plant breeder and geneticist at Texas A&M University. "There's so many different genes in the genome, and they're all interacting. We would have to grow more corn plants than there are stars in the sky, and measure all of them to figure out the function of all the genes in the genome." Instead, Murray searches for traits like heat tolerance by planting roughly 7,000 genetic variations of corn and using drones to see which varieties grow best. It's a way of exploring the genetic diversity that is buried in various strains without having to map the DNA itself.

Another solution to growing food on a hot planet is to move indoors. A few years ago, I met a guy named Jonathan Webb at a tech conference in Idaho. He had a [*Cont. on 132*]

MELINA MARA/"THE WASHINGTON POST"/GETTY IMAGES

DISPATCH FROM UKRAINE

‘They’re Wiping Us From the Earth’

A trip to the front reveals Russia’s ‘scorched earth’ strategy and Ukrainian troops trying to hold on

By MAC WILLIAM BISHOP

CROSSING THE FINAL checkpoint into a battle zone feels like a consecration.

The Ukrainian soldiers manning the last friendly post have a singular focus and intensity that’s lacking behind the lines. They wave us through solemnly, without smiles or chatter. We coast through the invisible barrier separating the “front” from the “rear,” then floor the gas and accelerate forward.

I’m in eastern Ukraine in late May, in a region called Donbas, where the war has become a whirlwind of carnage that is claiming the lives of as many as 100 Ukrainian soldiers a day. The casualties on the Russian side are almost certainly even higher, according to Ukrainian defense officials. I’ve heard conflicting reports about what is happening here, about whether the Ukrainian military is collapsing or the Russians are succeeding in breaking through the defender’s lines, cutting off thousands of soldiers. But it’s clear that Russia is inching forward, each day bringing it closer to its goal of annexing the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk and cementing the region under Moscow’s rule.

Ukraine won’t stop fighting. But it is sacrificing thousands of its finest soldiers and still losing ground. It cannot win the war without game-changing foreign-military assistance: American heavy artillery, Danish anti-ship missiles, German air-defense systems – these are slowly making their way to the battlefield. But can the Ukrainian military hold out long enough for any of it to make a difference?

To truly understand what is going on – to get a sense of morale and see how the soldiers are holding up under Russian assault, I must descend into the inferno, and I need a guide. A Ukrainian paratrooper will lead the way.

I’ve called in favors with the commander of a reconnaissance company in an air-assault brigade, and he links me up with an officer whose elite scout unit is operating near intense fighting outside a town called Lyman, a senior lieutenant who goes by the nom de guerre “Mace.”

IN THE LINE OF FIRE The war has shifted to the east of Ukraine, with Russia slowly gaining territory by pounding Ukrainian positions with overwhelming artillery barrages and air power.

Mace is soft-spoken and cordial, lean and fit as an endurance athlete. His face is that of a young man, but the salt-and-pepper hair hidden beneath his field hat and his calm self-possession amid chaos reveal he is a seasoned veteran who saw his share of combat before the current invasion. He takes me to the front in a Škoda station wagon, roaring down country back roads at 100-plus miles an hour, blasting techno as the foliage whips past in a blur.

Mace knows that speed counts here, and he weaves in and out of the anti-tank barricades that are strewn along the roads, gunning the engine as soon as we clear the concrete blocks and berms of dirt. I’m glad he knows which roads are mined. As we careen down a hill toward a crossroads surrounded by a scattering of farmhouses, I see a Ukrainian Akatsiya self-propelled artillery gun dashing toward the T-intersection ahead of us. It looks like we will get there at the same time. I point out the vehicle to Mace wordlessly, and I’m gratified to hear the engine revving instantly.

We are of the same mind. The Akatsiya, alone and moving in the open, is a prime tar-

ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

get for the Russians. Likely it's been "shooting-and-scooting": If they want to survive, the gun crew has to strike a balance between staying in position long enough to provide effective fire support to friendly ground forces, without lingering so long they get discovered by Russian drones.

The Russians are ceaselessly hunting Ukrainian heavy weapons, and their rockets, artillery, and missiles can strike anywhere here, at any time. The fields beside us are pockmarked with blast impacts, and the tails of dozens of dud rockets stick out of the earth as if planted by some mad farmer.

The intersection is a critical danger point: The Akatsiya must slow to nearly a stop to make the turn. If I was a Russian gunnery officer observing it via drone, that's when I'd try to hit it. The equation "speed x time = distance" looms in my mind.

We fly through the intersection ahead of the Akatsiya, and its crew doesn't spare us a glance. They're intent on their own survival, and making the cover of the tree line.

My concern is not abstract.

In the same area only days later, a team of journalists from *The Washington Post* is nearly killed when visiting a Ukrainian unit, artillery shells falling just yards from where they are standing. That they survive is pure luck.

Days before that, a French journalist is killed in an artillery strike while filming the evacuation of civilians fleeing the fighting in Severodonetsk, the focal point of the Russian assault.

It isn't necessarily that one can make all of the right choices and thereby stay safe on a battlefield. Sometimes luck works against you when artillery shells are falling. But it is worse to be caught in some places than others.

When we are back in the trees I relax slightly, but Mace doesn't slow down. He has a destination in mind.

"THIS IS HELL ON EARTH," Mace says quietly. We are watching as BM-21 Grad rockets rain down on Ukrainian positions near a village called Sviatohirsk. It's impossible to see their individual effects amid the smoke and haze covering the densely forested hills. Standing in an observation post on high ground amid feathery grass and wild garlic, I give up on trying to count individual impacts and instead just count the salvos, timing each barrage. I witness as many as 480 rockets fired on a single position in less than a minute, followed by artillery.

Between my service in the U.S. Marines and over more than a decade as a foreign correspondent, I've been engaged in the professional study of organized human violence for 25 years. But I've never seen anything even close to this volume of artillery being unleashed.

Mace has chosen our ground well, as you'd expect from an officer in an elite reconnaissance unit. We're in a fold of earth on a hill that gives us a clear view of the battle raging around Sviatohirsk – a quiet little village nestled among chalk hills, overlooked by a nearly 400-year-old monastery on the opposite side of the river. It lies to our left. We can also see the fighting around Lyman – a key railway junction – to our right.

What these two places have in common is they are on the Russian-occupied side of the winding Seversky Donets River, the main natural barrier to the enemy's advance. There are tens of thousands of Russian soldiers with hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles attacking here, assaulting in a vast crescent surrounding Severodonetsk, one of the largest cities in Donbas that remained in Ukrainian hands before the invasion began in February.

Lyman is obscured by smoke from a forest fire that began amid the fighting. The white smoke of the burning trees is interlaced with dark columns rising from destroyed buildings or vehicles. The rumble of booms is almost continuous. The *whump-whump-whump* of artillery is punctuated by the scream of tactical ballistic missiles, and the salvos of rocket artillery make a distinctive pattering of successive concussions. Almost all of it is being fired by the

Russians. The Ukrainian soldiers here have endured this maelstrom for weeks.

MOVING TARGET Ukrainian tanks often hide from Russian drones and air strikes in the trees. The numbers of troops greatly favor the Russians, according to a statement by President Zelensky.

"Things usually start to really kick off around 3 p.m.," Mace says. He describes what has become routine for his brigade of paratroopers: Russian scouts move forward to probe Ukrainian positions, then call in large-scale artillery strikes when they make contact. The artillery is followed by masses of armor supported by infantry. It's classic "combined arms" warfare, and would have been as familiar to a soldier in World War II as it is to Mace.

"The biggest problem is the artillery," Mace says. "The Russians just have so much."

What about the long-range artillery being provided by the United States and others?

"It's just starting to show up on the battlefield," Mace says. But for now, "there's just too much artillery. Too many tanks. We are fighting too hard."

Will Severodonetsk need to be abandoned?

"It's possible," he says. If it falls, it will be the biggest city taken by the enemy since Mariupol was lost in May, and will effectively mean that Russia controls the entire province of Luhansk, a primary goal of Putin's invasion.

There's a sudden pop as a cluster munition bursts over the battlefield, leaving behind a smattering of dark puffs as submunitions rain down on the village's defenders. It's followed by another seconds later.

The production and use of cluster munitions have been banned by an international treaty that went into effect in 2010, but that doesn't mean very much: Neither the United States nor Russia – the world's biggest arms dealers – have signed the accord. Neither has Ukraine. Cluster munitions spread submunitions – small explosives called bomblets – over a wide area, and are intended to kill or maim personnel and destroy vehicles and equipment. Many of the bomblets don't explode as designed when they hit the ground. Those unexploded bomblets will be found for years afterward.

Sometimes children mistake them for toys.

"THEIR ACTIONS are not as haphazard as before," Oleksandr Motuzianyk, the spokesman for Ukraine's Defense Ministry, tells me back in Kyiv when I ask about Russian tactics. "They're using combined arms and air support more effectively."

The simple fact is that despite its missteps, Russia has taken a lot of land since the invasion started. Ukraine, lacking Russia's deep reserves of manpower – however unskilled or untrained – cannot recapture it without superlative military technology. Meanwhile, the Russians are pushing ahead: Motuzianyk says their strategy is to encircle troops defending Severodonetsk.

The population of Severodonetsk was more than 100,000 before the invasion in February. Local officials and aid workers estimate that only 12,000 civilians remain, the rest having fled. The entire region has emptied, and daily life has ground to a halt.

The nearby city of Kramatorsk, which held 150,000 inhabitants before the war, is a ghost town. Only a few old people remain; a handful of shops open for a few hours in the daytime to provide food and groceries to the soldiers passing through and the few locals who still remain. A ballistic missile hit a train station there, crowded with refugees, killing 59 people in early April, and wounded more than 100, according to Ukrainian defense officials.

Slovyansk and Kramatorsk are just a few miles apart, and they have become staging areas for the Ukrainian military. They are under constant attack from Russian missiles and rockets: I am awoken throughout the night by resounding booms and constant air raids. One strike takes down the power grid and cellular networks for hours. Multiple strikes in both cities kill civilians, who refuse to leave their homes.

"Do you hear that?" an old man calls to his neighbor, gardening in his yard, as a violent series of explosions echoes through the streets.

"Oh, it's just thunder," the gardening man replies. Nearby, a middle-aged woman is pleading with an elderly neighbor to leave. "Where will you go when the Russians get here?"

The Russians have a lot of ground to cover before they can make it as far as Kramatorsk, but the woman has a point.

"The enemy intends to get to the administrative border of Luhansk" with the current offensive, Motuzianyk says. "The enemy intends to take full control of the region."

MAC WILLIAM BISHOP

But, he adds, "the main tactic remains that of scorched earth."

"Clearly the Russian leadership demanded changes to Russian tactics to achieve victories, and they are doing what they must to achieve that," Motuzianyk says. "They are destroying communities and wiping us off the Earth without regard for civilians."

AT A SMALL COMPOUND taken over by the airborne scouts, soldiers relax in the yard, grabbing whatever rest they can between missions. I'm standing beside a portly old soldier with a grandfatherly manner, enjoying the sunshine as cottony poplar seeds float densely through the air around us, lending an atmosphere of surreal tranquility as shells and rockets land in the surrounding hills.

The munitions strike so often that you begin to ignore anything that goes "boom," and only react to things that go "crack," indicating the explosive has landed unreasonably close.

Fighting here isn't a new experience for many of the paratroopers, and they are quick to remind me that for them the war began in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and sent its soldiers into Donbas to support pro-Russian separatists. Most Ukrainians remain bitter about the relatively weak Western response to those actions, and it's why they fear the West will once again buckle to Putin's aggression.

Ukrainians from all walks of life have told me how concerned they are about a repeat of 2014, with the international community acceding to the Russian seizure of their land – despite the blood they are spilling to defend it.

"These guys shouldn't have had to fight for eight years," the old soldier grimaces in dismay as he watches the young paratroopers. "They should be at home making babies. But here we are, stuck in this shit."

The commandeered building that the recon teams are using as their base is a hive of activity. There's civilian cars and captured Russian trucks the paratroopers are trying to get back into service. Many of the vehicles sport bullet holes or other obvious battle damage.

These paratroopers receive intensive instruction – many have trained with U.S. Special Forces and other elite NATO units – and their experience is unmatched: they have been regularly rotating through Donbas since 2014. Mace suggests I speak to one of his most seasoned veterans, a hardcore fighter who has been operating in Donbas for eight years. He's a rugged looking guy with a scratchy voice. I ask him what has changed now.

"One of the biggest problems is the drones," says "Ostap," the nom de guerre of the scout. "I hear Orlans [a type of Russian reconnaissance drone] all the time. But I almost never see them. They're too small and too high. It's next to impossible to shoot them down."

But the defense ministry says that soldiers have shot Russian drones down in the hundreds, I say.

He shrugs. "I don't know. I only believe what I see with my own eyes."

TOUR OF DUTY "Mace" is an elite soldier who has been fighting the Russians in the east for several years. "The problem isn't that we don't have enough people here," he says. "The problem is that we don't have enough well-trained people."

A big part of the problem in defending this part of Donbas, Ostap believes, is that the people who have stayed behind – the people who haven't fled – don't really believe they are part of Ukraine. In his view, the civilians who remain are all separatist sympathizers. He says they help the Russians navigate backcountry roads that aren't on the maps.

"Yeah, they're all waiting for *Russkiy mir*," Mace says, laughing when I ask his opinion about the locals. Russkiy mir, or "Russian world," is the revanchist concept that Russia needs to restore its central role in the affairs of its neighbors, and its borders, to what they were at the height of the Soviet empire.

He asserts there have been instances of local collaborators getting caught providing information about Ukrainian troop movements or locations. Indeed, Slovyansk fell to Russian separatists in 2014: The retaking of the city by the Ukrainian military later that summer was the first major battle in Donbas.

"Almost everyone here is pro-Russian. But you can't arrest people just for that," Mace says. In any case, the police and the SBU – Ukraine's internal security service – were doing what they could. "The SBU even arrested a couple of people in our brigade," he says.

"WE'RE LOOKING FOR BEARS," Mace says. He means Ukrainian tanks. I've seen several T-80s obscured among the trees, hoping to stay hidden from Russian aircraft and drones. We round a corner and there's one right in front of us, a squat hulking shape with the long barrel of its 125-mm cannon pointing down the road.

There's a tank platoon in the dark forest here, holding in reserve on favorable terrain, lest the Russians succeed in crossing the river.

There's been other signs of Ukrainian forces moving east to get in the fight. On the highway to Kramatorsk, we would pass periodic tank carriers loaded with armored vehicles or tanks, fuel trucks, and a few rarer sightings, like bridging equipment and a Buk anti-aircraft missile system that had only three of its four mounting points armed with missiles.

It doesn't seem like a lot of equipment given the scale of the fighting. I don't see any of the new artillery systems provided by the United States in its most recent aid package: There are also busloads of sleeping soldiers. Russians have concentrated their greatest resources here, according to President Zelensky. Mace doesn't see being outnumbered as the biggest problem, however.

"The problem is that we don't have enough well-trained people," he says. "The Territorial Defense Forces [volunteers called up for the current crisis, often with minimal training and equipment] will go to their trenches, and as soon as they see an enemy tank, they fill the radio net with panicked chatter and then run away, abandoning their positions."

He shakes his head grimly: "We need quality, not quantity. The opposite of the Russians."

As we dash through the forest, we happen upon a Ukrainian unit using an intersection as a staging area, they gather in a small clearing next to a large oak tree. They're in a mix of uniforms, some are even wearing articles of civilian clothing. Most of them are standing in front of a prisoner.

The prisoner is on his knees, blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back. He's wearing the distinctive uniform of Russian infantry. Because of Mace's dedication to fast driving, I don't process what I've seen until we pass. "A Russian prisoner!" Even as the words leave my mouth, a single gunshot cracks out.

I whip around to look back over my shoulder at the scene through the rear window as we turn left, praying I am not witness to a war crime. [*Cont. on 132*]

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YOUNG MEN

YOU CAN'T KEEP A HOT GIRL DOWN

MEGAN THEE STALLION is reigning over rap while reeling from loss, betrayal, and violence. Here, the superstar opens up like never before about all of it

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RAMONA ROSALES**

THE HOT LIST 2022

FOR JUST AN HOUR

Megan Thee Stallion's world shrinks to the size of a Los Angeles escape room. Here, on this April evening, there are no festivals to rehearse for, no verses to perfect, no brand deals to broker, no rumors to right or trauma to relive or pretrial hearings to sit through – just Megan, a small crew, and a steely determination to conquer the game.

"We did one before, and we were pretty bad at it," she says of her last escape-room experience. After we enter our room, Megan and I, along with three members of her team, each have a foot chained to the floor. It seems we've been captured by wayward seamen cursed for all eternity for their sins, and we have 60 minutes to escape their ghost ship. First, we need to get the shackles off our feet. There's a grid of rusty iron separating us from the other half of the room, where what looks like a birdcage hangs from the ceiling. I spot a key inside.

We prod at it with our hands and wooden poles we've been given. "Do we want to ask for help?" I suggest. "No!" Megan cries, matter-of-factly. Sam, of her Roc Nation management team, eventually knocks the key toward us with one of the poles.

"Are you competitive?" I ask Sam. "*Stupid* competitive," he replies. "I'm *fucking crazy* competitive," Megan one-ups, then shows just what she means. As we make our way from room to room, Megan takes the lead, climbing on stools, peering through peepholes, guiding us through mazes, and turning over props. Her head swivels from corner to corner, surveying every crevice for the next way out.

Eventually, we make it out with only a handful of hints from our game master. "The first time we did it, it took way longer," Megan says. "I'm starting to understand the rooms more, though. Next time we'll be thinking three steps ahead."

Sure, breaking out of the ghost ship was hard, but it's designed to be conquered. Megan has to look at her life the same way, or else the weight of the loss, violence, and vitriol she's faced will pulverize her.

In just a few years, Megan Jovon Ruth Pete has gone from rapping at Houston kickbacks and strip clubs to becoming one of the biggest new superstars in music, assembling a legion of fans she's dubbed Thee Hotties. Along the way, in March 2019, she lost her mother – a Houston rapper known as Holly-Wood, who raised Megan on UGK and Biggie, and later became her manager – to brain cancer, then lost her great-grandmother just two weeks later. (Megan's father, Joseph Pete Jr., was incarcerated for the first eight years of her life; after he got home, he and Megan were attached at the hip until he died when she was 15.)

Those losses left Megan, now 27, without the people she trusted most as she navigated skyrocketing fame, graduated from Texas Southern University (with a bachelor's degree in health administration), and, most shockingly, endured a July 2020 shooting allegedly at the hands of Tory Lanez, a recording artist and former friend. She survived, but has been locked in a contentious battle in court – and the court of public opinion – ever since.

Even without any extra emotional distress, life as hip-hop's resident It girl and one of the best rappers alive can be *intense*. During the three months I got to know her, Megan premiered her first Super Bowl commercial, rehearsed for and shot her first major-movie role, released a single featuring Dua Lipa while joining her on tour, became the first woman to rap on the Oscar stage, presented the Grammy for Best New Artist (which she had won the year prior), completely shut shit down at Coachella, graced the Met Gala's red carpet, performed at the *Billboard* Music Awards (where she took home the prize for Top Female Rap Artist, and also endured some odd, clingy behavior from supermodel Cara Delevingne, who fangirled over Megan all evening), and, oh, yeah, wrote and recorded much of her highly anticipated second studio album, which she hopes to have out this summer. "I want to take you through so many different emotions," she says of the album, an effort to process her pain without losing sight of her strength. "At first you was twerking, now you might be crying."

Her friends, her team, and escape rooms help, but night after night, she still dreams about the shooting. " 'Right now we're going through some dark things. You are built for this,' " she says, coaching herself. " 'God must got something good planned for you, because I don't think he'll put you through this if he wasn't going to give you your reward at the end.' "

AFTER WINDING THROUGH the streets of some of L.A.'s most-gilded neighborhoods, past Beverly Grove and through the Hills, we arrive at the Bel-Air mansion Megan has made her home base for the month of Coachella. The sprawling home feels busy, if a bit icy, with its towering, crisp white walls, and various bags and boxes in corners. A few of the people who keep the gears of the Megan machine turning mill about quietly. Two of her five dogs, gray Frenchies named 4oe and Oneita, bark hello from their kennels. (She also owns a lizard.) Her pets, innocent and affectionate, put Megan at ease. "I don't think they would do anything to hurt me," she says. "That's something I know for a fact."

Megan and I take our seats in an elegant dining room for a dinner of six vegetarian courses prepared by her chef. As he drops off some crudité, Megan laughs to herself. "They are really embarrassing me," she says of her team.

"How so?"

"Because they are being so formal."

I ask her if things are normally more low-key around her.

"We are all playful. They're being so serious tonight."

After her chef leaves us with a sweet-squash dish that Megan loves, she notes how kind he is. Megan has a habit of keeping the people she takes to close: her Roc Nation team; her longtime manager, T. Farris; Emilio Coochie, who has been photographing and filming her since 2018; her hairstylist and best friend, Kellon; the women who do her makeup and nails; her best friends from college; and her close friend from high school, Callie. "I don't know if it's a

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Staff writer MANKAPRR CONTEH *profiled Noname last September. This is her first cover story for RS.*

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCTION BY SJ ASHBY AND RYAN HOLT FOR ANDERSON HOPKINS/KINDLY PRODUCTIONS. HAIR BY KELLON DERYCK. MAKEUP BY LAUREN ELISE CHILD. NAILS BY MICHELLE NGUYEN. STYLING BY ERIC ARCHIBALD AND HANNA ISAKSSON. TAILORING BY ALEX NAVARRO.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

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Southern thing," she explains, "but I love feeling like this is my family. This is my thing. This is safe."

In July 2020, a year after her mother and great-grandmother died, and six weeks after topping the *Billboard* Hot 100 with her "Savage" remix, Megan was looking for family, filling a void with new friendships and fun nights out. Rapper and singer Tory Lanez was one of those new friends, and the evening of July 11 began as one of those nights.

Forty-five minutes into dinner, she confronts the toll of that evening head on. It started with Megan streaming herself, her friend Kylie Jenner, and Lanez lounging in Jenner's pool on Instagram Live. After the poolside hang, Megan headed home in a car with Lanez, his driver, and her former best friend from Houston, Kelsey Harris. Megan explained what she says happened next in an April interview with CBS' Gayle King.

Megan said an argument broke out between Harris and Lanez in the car, prompting her to ask the driver to pull over and let her out. Megan got out, but says the others persuaded her to get back in, since they were close to their destination. After getting back into the car, she said, the arguing escalated. According to an LAPD detective who interviewed Megan, she and Harris argued, too; L.A. prosecutors say Megan and Lanez also argued.

When Megan got out of the car for good, she said, Lanez shouted "Dance, bitch!" and began shooting at her. Her feet bleeding, Megan dropped to the ground and crawled to a stranger's driveway. Speaking to Gayle King, Megan said Lanez apologized profusely, and begged for Megan's silence by offering her and Harris "a million dollars." Police vehicles and helicopters swarmed the scene; saying she feared law enforcement would respond with deadly force if they found out a Black man was holding a gun, Megan told police she stepped on glass. (Lanez has denied shooting Megan; his representative did not respond on the record to a request for further comment.)

Lanez was arrested for carrying a concealed firearm. Meanwhile, Megan was taken to the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, still maintaining she had stepped on glass. As officers left the hospital, a doctor reportedly told Megan there were bullet fragments in both of her feet. (CBS and Page Six later obtained the hospital's medical report that corroborates Megan's account of her hospital admittance and bullet wounds.)

Megan says that, at first, she tried to protect Lanez by keeping the shooting private. Then came the spread of jokes, memes, and what she says is false information – like rumors that Megan and Lanez had a sexual relationship and that she became jealous as Lanez and Jenner interacted that night. Soon, though, it became too much for her.

On Aug. 20, 2020, just weeks after releasing her smash Cardi B collaboration "W.A.P.," Megan named Lanez as her alleged assailant in an Instagram Live stream: "You shot me and you got your publicist and your people going to these blogs lying." In October 2020, Lanez was charged with one felony count of assault with a semiautomatic firearm and another for carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm in a vehicle. The case is set to go to trial in September; Lanez has pleaded not guilty.

Back in the L.A. mansion, the dinner table between us feels a mile wide as Megan begins to cry, still struggling to process everything that happened. I ask if I can sit beside her, and she agrees, eyes damp and hurt radiating outward. "I thought we had a real connection," she says of Lanez. She believed she and the rapper had bonded over the mutual loss of their mothers; Lanez's mom died of anemia complications when he was 11. "I thought he knew me. And I never would've thought he would've shot at me at all."

"I never put my hands on this man," she continues. "I never did anything to him. There was an argument. People argue every day. Friends argue every day."

Megan's scars run deep. First, there was the grueling physical recovery. "What nobody knows is, I had to get the surgery the same night. I stayed in the hospital in California for maybe four days," she says. "Then I was in New York for a while. Both of my legs wrapped up. I could not walk. I still have bullet fragments in my feet right now. I was very scared that I was not able to be Megan Thee Stallion no more. And I was fucked up." She began physical therapy in New York before traveling to Tampa, Florida, where she regained the ability to walk.

There are the nightmares. Then, there's the embarrassment, the way she blames herself for what happened and how she handled it. "I feel shame, a little bit, because even after he shot me, I still was thinking about everybody else in the car," she says. "I thought everybody in the car was my friend, [and] the whole time, that's not how they thought of me. That's what really hurts."

The incident, Megan implies, was a betrayal on two fronts. Megan claims that Harris met with Lanez at a hotel less than two days after the shooting. "I'm like, 'Kelsey, as my best friend, why would you meet up with the person you saw shoot your best friend?' " Megan tells me. "She said, 'Megan, y'all wasn't answering my calls. My back was against the wall. I didn't know what to do.' What the fuck do you mean your back is against the wall? You're the only person in this situation that would clear this up for me.

"This girl told me out her mouth, 'He told me, "Oh, thank you for not saying nothing. Now let me invest in your business. Let me do this. Let me do that."' And all I know was, from that day on, she never said nothing else about the whole situation online." (Harris did not respond to a request for comment; Lanez's representative did not respond on the record to a request for comment on this allegation.)

Before pleading not guilty to the charges against him, Lanez released an album on the back of the incident. On it, he claims he's being framed, while alluding to a soured romance with Megan. ("That man was never my ex. You were never my man," Megan insists.) Lanez continued to allude on Twitter to a sexual relationship with both Megan and Harris. After Megan posted screenshots of an apology Lanez texted to her hours after the shooting, Lanez wrote, "Good Dick had me fucking 2 best friends . . . and I got caught . . . that's what I apologized 4 . . . it's sick how u Spun it tho . . ."

That same day, Lanez bolstered false claims by media personality DJ Akademiks, who has been lambasted for sensationalizing violent conflicts in rap and for his recurring, hateful, misogynistic tirades against Megan. In February, Akademiks tweeted that court proceedings revealed that Lanez's DNA wasn't found on the gun recovered at the scene of the shooting (in court, Lanez's attorney claimed that a DNA swab of the gun was "inconclusive," and that "there were four contributors") and that he had seen unreleased evidence that seemingly absolved Lanez of the crime (release of which, if by Lanez, would have been a violation of a court order). Lanez's attorney argued that Lanez did not provide Akademiks with any such evidence, but because he egged on Akademiks' claims on Twitter while addressing Megan, Lanez was briefly taken into custody for violating court orders prohibiting him from contacting or harassing Megan, or discussing any discovery in the case with outside parties.

"I think it's so crazy that people are able to get online or publish anything that is not a 100 percent fact. That really is messing with my life. How are you able to do it and get away with it?" she says, before hinting at her plans to tackle rumors about the incident. "I just learned that you really can't get away with that, and I'm going to get you. Right now I'm just getting all my stuff together because I'm seeing it. Yeah, you keep doing that. I'm going to spin the block on you."

MEGAN WILL FACE TORY LANEZ IN COURT WHEN THE CASE AGAINST HIM GOES TO TRIAL IN SEPTEMBER. "I WANT HIM TO GO TO JAIL," SHE SAYS. "I WANT HIM *UNDER* THE JAIL."

CHOKER BY **LAUREL DEWITT**. EARRINGS AND RINGS BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**.

BODYSUIT BY **HOUSE OF JMC**. EARRINGS BY **VINTAGE ESCADA**. RINGS AND CUFFS BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**.

Beyond crass YouTubers eager to discredit Megan with inane theories and dubious claims, there's a whopping brood of sexist, crude, online randos who insist she has lied about being attacked by Lanez, that this is a ploy for some sort of perverted clout, that she should be retaliated against.

When Megan's assault is the topic du jour on my Twitter timeline, I mostly see messages supporting her and rebuking her detractors. Megan gets glimpses of this, too. "When I see Thee Hotties care about my mental health, they'll be like, 'OK, girl, you don't want to get online. That's fine. Oh, Megan, I'm just sending you love and support today,' " she recalls. "I'm like, 'Y'all know my spirit!' "

But more often she encounters disparagement. "I get online," Megan says. "I see funny shit all day. But then in the mix of that, there is also 20 people ating me at one time, saying crazy stuff. I'm like, 'My 15 minutes [online] is over. Get off.' " When she's not seeing her version of that night's events blatantly discounted, she's seen Lanez being celebrated, sometimes gruesomely. "I see people saying, 'Damn, I would've shot that bitch too,' " says Megan.

"In some kind of way I became the villain," Megan says, bewildered. "And I don't know if people don't take it seriously because I seem strong. I wonder if it's because of the way I look. Is it because I'm not light enough? Is it that I'm not white enough? Am I not the shape? The height? Because I'm not petite? Do I not seem like I'm worth being treated like a woman?" For just a moment, her voice cracks.

"I'm trying every day to get through it and be good. I feel so bad because I don't feel like anybody's taking me seriously, but I don't want them to see me cry. I don't want them to know that I feel like this, because I don't want them to feel like, 'Oh, I got you. I'm breaking you.' "

She seems to especially feel this way about her alleged attacker. " 'I feel like you've already tried to break me enough. You've already shot me. So, why are you dragging it out like this? Like, what else? Have you hated me this much the whole time and I didn't see it?' "

As it stands, Megan will face Lanez in court when the case against him goes to trial in September. "I want him to go to jail," Megan says plainly. "I want him to go *under* the jail."

MEGAN WRITES everywhere – in the car, in bed, in the shower. "I put my phone outside the shower but close enough to where I could still tap it. Shit be getting wet all the time, fucking up my phones," she explains. "It's a whole movie trying to write in the shower, but I keep my speaker loud and I just freestyle, and then I write it down when I get out." She's spent more time than ever writing songs for her new album. She does, after all, have a legacy to build: "I just always want people to remember, 'Yes, Megan Thee Stallion, she was great, she was a rapper. She was one of the best rappers, the coldest.' "

Megan made a home of Criteria Studios in North Miami while recording the album, joining the company of the icons who have recorded there too – Aretha Franklin, Fleetwood Mac, AC/DC, Lil Wayne. When I meet her there in early March, she breezes in, her layers of cherry-red and black hair bouncing, with 4oe and Oneita darting behind her. She's bubbly and hot, tugging at her sleek nude sundress as we sit next to each other in soft, dark leather swivel chairs, a massive mixing console in front of us.

Shawn "Source" Jarrett – who has been Megan's engineer since he worked on "Simon Says," from her breakout mixtape, *Fever* – sits at the console to play us some of the 25 to 30 songs Megan has recorded for the album. He calls Megan "sis," with casual affection, and gets her a fresh tea when she asks him to "pretty please" have the one she's sipping reheated.

"This song has a feature," Megan says before Source cues up a new track called "Pressurelicious." It goes. The beat is dark and intense, and Megan's initial staccato raps are cool and sexy as she announces "I'm stompin' on ho's so motherfuckin' hard I'm knockin' out Mario tokens!" Source, jamming, throws an uppercut into the air when a digital chime punctuates the bar. Soon, Megan is joined on the song by Future, and the pair start trading bars.

Future is sometimes described as romantically toxic, but he's one of Megan's favorite rappers. "He just so fucking ratchet!" she says with a big laugh. "He is unapologetically himself. I appreciate that about anybody who gets up and has to do anything in the public eye. Anybody who has to read about their life online every day and deal with so many energies and can put it out into their music and do it gracefully, I feel like you deserve your flowers."

"Pressurelicious" is fun and hype, and when I catch up to her in May, Megan says her album could use more songs like it. "You know, the girls they be wanting to turn up," she says. Every time I talk to Megan, she's close to knowing just what she wants on the project.

She's particularly proud of the way "Gift and Curse" layers personal revelation on top of exuberant dance music. Of the five songs she plays me, it's my favorite. Produced by Murda Beatz, it's shrouded in menacing piano and bouncing bass. After asserting her independence in the first verse, Megan gives a set of freaky shout-outs to sex organs and her dominion over them in the second – "My motherfucking body, my choice/Ain't no lil dick taking my voice."

The hook, though – "A bitch like me, yeah, I know my worth/Fucking with me is a gift and a curse" – is a glimpse into her psyche. "I can take care of myself. I'm so emotionally strong. I'm so independent," she explains later. "You know how easy it is for me to dismiss you, because I don't need you."

But she's also thinking about how these assets can hurt her. "It's a gift that I'm so strong," she says, "but I feel like it's also a curse because it makes things get kind of lonely sometimes. Everybody's kind of like, 'Well, you good. You got it. I ain't messing with you.' So I feel like it makes people treat me not as delicate as I would like them to."

Her manager, T. Farris, is one of a handful of people whose musical critiques Megan says she considers now that her mom is no longer around. Farris tells me he likes "Pressurelicious," "Plan B," and "Gift and Curse" as much as I did. "Those particular three records," he says, "are not really party records. They really have substance."

Farris was president of A&R and an artist manager for the Houston independent label Swishahouse, working closely with local stars Paul Wall and Mike Jones. Megan grew up on that sound. Farris is especially fond of "Plan B," the explosive diss track to an unnamed ex that Megan premiered publicly onstage during Coachella's first weekend. (Megan is clear that the song is not about Lanez, despite online speculation.) "It gave me an old-school, Lil Kim feel," Farris says of the song. "I really love when Megan goes in, and just raps, and it's not about twerking. I always want people to understand that she's really one of the ones that can rap."

"IN SOME KIND OF WAY, I BECAME THE VILLAIN," MEGAN SAYS OF THE SHOOTING'S AFTERMATH. "IS IT THAT I'M NOT WHITE ENOUGH? AM I NOT THE SHAPE? THE HEIGHT?"

Farris is more than a manager to Megan; he's like a brother. "He probably is the only person who really knows exactly what I'm feeling and what's on my mind," she says. "When we up, we're jumping around, we're happy, with the puppies running. Then when I'm sad, he'll be like, 'OK, cry it out for a little bit, but we need to get up and get it together. You Megan Thee Stallion!' He really is my hype man."

Megan trusts Farris because he was one of the few people her mother trusted. They met Farris while he was working with 1501 Certified Entertainment, the

label Megan signed to in 2018 before signing with a different label, 300 Entertainment, later that same year. (Since 2020, Megan has been fighting 1501 Certified in court, claiming she's locked in an "unconscionable" contract, and that the label has tried to prevent her from fulfilling the terms of it. In March, 1501 countersued, saying it is owed more music and money from the rapper.) "My momma didn't like anybody in life," Megan explains. "So when she liked T. Farris, I was like, 'This man might be an angel.' "

Megan's mom constantly permeates her thoughts, and on her new song "Anxiety," she confronts the loss more candidly than she ever has on wax. "Anxiety" is not one of Megan's best-sounding songs – its beat is a little too simple and saccharine – but it's one of her most open. Part of a verse includes a letter she wishes she could send to her mom in heaven: "I would tell her sorry that I really been wildin', and ask her to forgive me cuz I really been trying," she raps.

In one of their last conversations, Megan's mother gave her a pep talk. Holly was in the hospital in Houston, just informed she had a brain tumor, while Megan was expected to fly to L.A. for a show. "She was like, 'Megan, I don't want you to miss this opportunity just because I'm sick. I don't want that to stop you from being Megan Thee Stallion. You need to take Farris and y'all need to go to L.A.' "

Megan stayed with her mother until midnight that evening, when her mom believed she was taking off to make the show. "Hell no, I wasn't leaving my momma," Megan says. "I just didn't want to stress her out. I just wanted to go home, take a bath real quick, and I was going to come back." Around two hours later, Megan got a call that her mother was unresponsive. Soon, she was gone.

In May, around the time of the Met Gala, Megan flew Madlyn to New York from Houston for her birthday, which they celebrated with a dinner attended by all of their small family, as a surprise. They cried and ate and laughed. Megan felt happy. She felt normal. She felt at peace.

MEGAN WANTS TO reclaim her story and tell it her way. That's one of the goals for her new album. There's also a docuseries on her rise in the works, too, and Netflix is developing a comedy series loosely based on her life, the product of a first-look production deal. Megan plans to write for the show, and she's working toward a directorial career, too. Also on her to-do list: making more cinematic music videos. Last year's "Thot Shit" clip, in which a hypocritically sexist legislator is terrorized by Megan and a pack of twerking working-class women, was gorgeous, funny, weird, and thought-provoking – and Megan says it's just a taste of what's to come.

I ask her to look even further ahead: to her sunset years, after a life on the biggest stages and behind the scenes. "I feel I'm going to be a lit-ass grandma," she replies. "Still going to be like, 'Yes, I still got the good knees!' What? I got a lineage of good knees. It's like my daughter, her daughter, her daughter-daughter. It's just going to be a bunch of us just lit-ass beautiful Black women!"

In the meantime, Megan is dating Pardison Fontaine, an artist and songwriter who's worked with Cardi B and contributed to the "Savage" remix. ("Not my part," Megan clarifies.) They have a creative partnership. "I feel like he's so good. And he feels like I'm so good," Megan says. "There are always instrumentals playing. So if I can hear him rapping, I'll be like, 'OK, I'm going to do better than that.' Or if he likes the beat that I'm playing, he'll be like, 'Hey, let me get that beat.' We sharpen each other."

Online, they are goofy together and proud of each other. In March, Fontaine, known casually as Pardi, posted a celebratory reel that captured Megan dancing, performing, posing, and achieving. It showed clips of her college graduation, her defiant *Saturday Night Live* performance, and her humanitarian award from Houston Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, all set to his song "Hoop Earrings," where he raps, "If you a Black girl, do your thing."

"I appreciate him for loving on me even when I don't feel like I love me," Megan tells me. Though she seems happy with Fontaine, her trauma can be a block. "I have a lot of anxiety, and I know I'm probably depressed on some level. I'll be like, 'Damn, you really sticking through it?' " she says of him. " 'I really want to be good for you because I'm trying to be good for myself.' But I just . . . I don't know. Right now, I really don't know, because sometimes I don't feel good about me. So I feel like it's hard to be in a relationship when you are not loving on yourself right."

And yet, Megan has taken incredible strides to stand up for herself and people like her. During that *SNL* performance, three months after her shooting, she protested the minuscule charge levied against an officer involved in the death of Breonna Taylor, then spoke to the crowd: "We need to protect our Black women. And love our Black women, 'cause at the end of the day, we need our Black women." Shortly after, she penned an op-ed, published in *The New York Times*, focusing on Black women's sociopolitical achievements and setbacks, and contextualizing her own experiences among them. "You know what?" she wrote. "I'm not afraid of criticism."

Her late great-grandmother instilled a sense of social responsibility in her. "I would always see her from outside her front door, giving out money to the kids that would walk past the house. Any family members, any of her friends, she was always helping," she says. "She lived in the hood, but she felt so rich. I know money didn't make her, she made money. I always wanted to be like her."

After leaving a trail of philanthropy – from donating $8,000 to help fund a fallen fan's funeral to six- and seven-figure giving campaigns in partnership with Popeyes and Fashion Nova – Megan launched the Pete & Thomas Foundation, named in honor of her parents. Self-funded for now, it focuses on education and housing, as well as health and wellness.

There are the things that have happened to Megan Thee Stallion. Then there are the things – the beautiful, awe-inspiring, culture-shifting things – she's made happen for herself. It's been only three years since her breakthrough single, "Big Ole Freak," hit the charts. It's been only three years since she dropped *Fever*, her riotous venture into the mainstream, where she declared that the only thing we need to know about her is that she's in love with money. She then found her every move and trauma under a microscope, and saw as many people celebrating her tragic losses as her momentous wins.

When I ask Megan what, exactly, she would like people to know about her life now, she pauses. "OK, yes, I very much went through that," she says after a moment. "Yes, it's very fucked up, but I'm still me. Look at everything I can accomplish and everything I can do in the face of it. I'm still not letting nothing knock me down to take me off my game. So you shouldn't let nothing take you off your game, either. Because if I can get through this shit, you could get through your shit."

"I'M GOING TO BE A LIT-ASS GRANDMA," SHE SAYS, IMAGINING HERSELF AT 70. "STILL GOING TO BE LIKE, 'YES, I STILL GOT THE GOOD KNEES!' I GOT A LINEAGE OF GOOD KNEES."

Holly's final encouragement has stuck with Megan. So have Holly's taste, critiques, and faith in her. "When I make music, I always scratch the first draft because I feel my momma would've scratched it for me. So I'm like, 'OK, go harder than that,' " she says. Those memories hold her up, as does the example she feels she needs to set for Holly's mother, her grandmother Madlyn. "Ever since my mom and my great-grandma passed, she's been really depressed," says Megan. "I don't want to show her that anything is getting to me because I don't want it to get to her."

DRESS BY **AFFFAIR HAUTE COUTURE.** JEWELRY BY **ALEXIS BITTAR**.

HOT TRIPLE THREAT

ZORA

A Black trans singer, rapper, and producer who makes edgy, joyful club anthems for a dark and frightening world

WHEN ZORA GREY was 16, she wanted to be a jazz singer. So she tried out for a class at her performing-arts high school in Los Angeles, only to be slotted instead into a music-technology class where kids learned how to make beats. "I was so annoyed," says the Minneapolis-based musician, 23. But she got hooked on the feeling of freedom she got from constructing her own world from scratch, and soon she was on her way to becoming the exceptionally talented singer, rapper, and producer whose debut LP, *Z1*, is one of 2022's most thrilling listens — packed with pummeling techno beats, irrepressible pop hooks, and sharp bars.

The album began to take form in 2020, at a time when Zora recalls feeling overwhelmed by news of the pandemic and violence against Black trans women like herself. "I felt like I wanted to go into hiding," she says. "For my own safety." She fought through that fear to make "All Around the World!," a joyful, catchy highlight of the LP. "I wanted a song that gave girls — Black girls, specifically, Black trans girls, even more specifically — a sense of hope," she adds. "It was honestly what saved my life." **SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **CAMERON WITTIG**

HOT SOUND

MÚSICA MEXICANA

How a new generation is reinventing traditional Mexican sounds in thrilling new ways

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

DannyLux, Adriel Favela, and Natanael Cano (from left)

AS SOON AS Alex Guerra and Ramon Ruiz discovered 15-year-old Yahritza Martinez on TikTok, they knew she was going to be huge. The high schooler from Yakima, Washington, had been courting a massive following on social media with her shockingly powerful voice, and Ruiz and Guerra – both artists from the seminal Mexican band Legado 7 and founders of the label Lumbre Music – quickly signed her and her two brothers, Armando and Jairo Martinez, forming the band Yahritza y Su Esencia. Still, no one could have predicted the seismic wave caused by the band's first single, "Soy El Unico'': In March, the emotional ballad shot to the top of *Billboard*'s Hot Latin Songs chart and made Yahritza the youngest Latin artist to chart on the *Billboard* 100, ever.

Yahritza's story is unique on its own, but it also fits into the larger story of música Mexicana's impressive global expansion. "Música Mexicana," also known as "regional," is an umbrella label that encompasses banda, norteña, mariachi, and more – all sounds that have been getting bigger and bigger. Headline-making Coachella sets this April included performances by the Sinaloan group Banda MS and the seven-piece mega-band Grupo Firme, and in May, the brooding outfit Eslabon Armado released *Nostalgia,* the first música Mexicana album to reach the Top 10 on the *Billboard* 200. At Apple Music, música Mexicana has seen double-digit growth every year since 2017, and in the first four months of 2022, it's up by 33 percent compared with the same period in 2021.

Some of the popularity of música Mexicana can also be tracked to the rise of corridos. For more than 200 years, Mexico's most epic stories – tales of glowing heroism, crushing betrayals, bloody battles, tragic deaths – have roamed the world through these folksy, guitar-driven narrative ballads based on both real-life and fictional events. Last year at Spotify, corridos made up half of all streams within Mexican music, with acts such as the enigmatic singer-songwriter El Fantasma, the rising talent Luis R Conriquez, and the swashbuckling pair Los Dos Carnales boosting those numbers. The platform also reports that since 2019, there's been a 116 percent increase in listening among Gen Z audiences; they've connected, in particular, with Gen Z artists such as DannyLux, known for gentler alternative corridos, and Natanael Cano, whose trap-flecked style of corridos tumbados have drawn in megastars including Bad Bunny.

"We're seeing a huge increase in Gen Z listening to corridos, especially when it is catered to them," says Daniel Calderon, senior editor of U.S. Latin editorial at Spotify. He notes the popularity of the playlists Corridos Perrones and La Mamalona, the latter of which was created specifically for younger people who want to blast corridos in their cars. "The younger generation feels a connection to the look and feel and the stories the new musicians are creating," he says.

To Krystina DeLuna, Apple's global programmer for música Mexicana, the genre's popularity has to do with geography – how its artists have always straddled two cultures. Chalino Sanchez came to the U.S. in the late Seventies from Sinaloa as an undocumented migrant worker and launched his music career in Los Angeles. Other legacy acts – including Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and the late icon Jenni

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVID ALVA; JHONNY ARSENIO TARAZONA SÁNCHEZ; JACKIE GALLARDO

In March, Yahritza Martinez became the youngest Latin artist to chart on the *Billboard* 100.

Rivera – continued popularizing Mexican sounds of all genres, and attracting listeners navigating both cultures. "That's who the fans are: They're listeners that don't just live in one world," DeLuna says.

Guerra and Ruiz started Legado 7 in 2015, both Mexican transplants living in California. They drew inspiration from the corrido greats before them and wrote about one subject they knew intimately: weed. Unwittingly, they created a subgenre called corridos verdes, or "green corridos," which became pot anthems for legions of stoner kids. "We definitely changed the game," Ruiz says. "Honestly, we never said, 'We're gonna do this' – it just happened." Their music highlighted how new generations were mixing influences all around them. "These are all kids with parents who were listening to Chalino Sanchez and Vicente Fernández, and then they went to school and were listening to Jay-Z and Tupac," says Ximena Acosta, an entertainment-strategy consultant who met Legado 7 when she first entered the música Mexicana world. "They came up with their own kind of music that really became a lifestyle."

Natanael Cano – a quiet, tatted kid born in the Mexican state of Sonora, which shares a border with Arizona and New Mexico – was deeply influenced by American hip-hop and Latin trap, and became the face of corridos tumbados, a blend of traditional corridos and hip-hop beats. Following the success of the 2019 "Soy Diablo" remix he did with Bad Bunny, he's kept pulling rappers into his world: Lil Mosey, for example, made a cameo on his latest album, *NataKong,* released in April. Other reggaeton stars have taken note: At the end of last year, Jhay Cortez jumped on Ivan Cornejo's viral sad sierreño ballad "Esta Dañada," while Karol G tested out her own corrido-making skills on "200 Copas."

Adriel Favela, a singer-songwriter born in San Francisco and raised in Mexico, says that the cross-pollination between these genres is part of what's making Mexican music ubiquitous around the world. "I've even seen Dominicans singing corridos lately – and they're dope!" he says. Earlier this year, he released *Cosas del Diablo*, which bounces from corridos to banda to ranchera while embracing bold alt-pop sounds. He thinks one of the reasons these sounds are resonating has to do not just with experimenting, but also with how these genres serve as vehicles for storytelling and self-expression. "This is like a musical diary that lets Latinos express themselves. . . . At the end of the day, they're stories of pain, of suffering, of joy, of hope, of faith."

Still, some artists think the industry should be doing more to make sure Mexican genres continue skyrocketing to the top. Cano started his own label, called Los CT, to support new artists and prioritize top-notch production. "Regional can be bigger," he told ROLLING STONE earlier this year. "It would be at the top if we had the best studios, the best engineers, and people working with their whole heart. We're trying to change all that with Los CT." DeLuna and other industry leaders have also championed the term "música Mexicana" over "regional." "I feel like that name in general gives a perception that we're a regional sound, and we're not. The goal is global," she says.

And kids like Yahritza, Cornejo, and other breakout stars are shaping the future, particularly through their new take on acoustic sierreño traditions that have gone viral. These newcomers, clad in snapbacks and sneakers, have changed the look and feel of the music, and they aren't afraid to sing at the top of their lungs for millions on social media. Ruiz and Guerra remember that when they were kids, they were a little embarrassed about playing Mexican music. "I wouldn't tell anyone that I played the accordion," Ruiz says. "That's all changing now. Nowadays, you see all these little kids taking their instruments to school," Guerra says. "It's cool to be a *músico*."

KENZIE

She helped invent the sound of K-pop, and she's far from finished

IT BEGINS WITH a crystalline, whistling melody, cresting and dipping, beckoning you closer. All of a sudden, NCT 127's 2021 track "Favorite (Vampire)" plummets into a quirky, hip-trap groove, as the rappers spit about a dangerous love that hurts so good. Then, the main event: the chorus, where that haunting refrain bursts forth once again, cradling dazzling harmonic layers of the group's vocals.

This song bears the fingerprints of someone who's helped build the sound of K-pop as we know it: Kenzie, a producer and songwriter for SM Entertainment, one of K-pop's biggest agencies. Since she joined SM in 2003, Kenzie has been credited with at least 30 Top 10 singles in South Korea. Born Kim Yeon-jung, she grew up studying classical music in South Korea before attending Berklee. K-pop, meanwhile, had just begun to grow. "I wanted to produce music, and it naturally led to K-pop," Kenzie says. "I felt that what I was hearing in pop and electronic at the time was the future of the next generation of music."

For the majority of the next decade, Kenzie would craft songs nearly entirely by herself, including her first Korean Number One, BoA's "My Name," in 2004. Along the way, songwriting camps — weeklong intensives where producers and songwriters from around the globe come together to collaborate — changed the way production was done, though that newer system is losing its sparkle. "Because all the major labels try to adopt the same system," she says. "I feel like the freshness is losing edge." But Kenzie isn't one to dwell on the past. "We say that all possible melodies have been put out in the world," she says, a sly smile playing on her face. "But I still look for new melodies, something different from the past. Something that would revolutionize the music industry." NATALIE MORIN

HOT K-POP PRODUCER

FROM TOP: RITA FEREGRINO; COURTESY OF SM ENTERTAINMENT

SUPREME

HOT HYPEBEAST GOLD

In a moment of social upheaval, the clothing brand managed to become a bona fide cultural institution

BY JEFF IHAZA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **GRIFFIN LOTZ**

THE SUMMER OF 2020 still has a feeling of unreality to it. Did millions of Americans really rise up in the largest civil rights protests since the Sixties? Did it all really happen during the peak of an unprecedented global pandemic? Did Katt Williams really offer one of the most sobering comedy specials of the year, in an ad for Supreme? In the clip, posted to the brand's Instagram page, Williams is adorned with a vibrant Tekashi-colored hairstyle. Directed by Ben Solomon, the clip has the feeling of the early-2000s comedy specials that would air on cable TV, back when something resembling a collective culture could be agreed upon. Williams connects to a growing concern: "Who's gonna say something that makes sense?"

That the answer to Williams' question is Supreme, the clothing brand founded in 1994 by James Jebbia and first popularized by New York's population of skaters, isn't immediately obvious. But it is true. The brand manages to stay relevant without veering into "thirsty," the impossible task of being cool without trying. Earlier this year, the company named Tremaine Emory – who has partnered with Kanye West, worked with Stüssy, and founded his own brand, Denim Tears – as its creative director, solidifying Supreme's place in the culture.

In addition to the company's overall sensibility, its fast-paced release schedule means it stays ahead of competition. The Summer 2022 line includes racing jackets, a top inspired by the cult film *Gummo,* and baggy silhouettes that many brands are still catching up to. At the end of 2020, Supreme announced its sale to VF Corp. at a valuation of $2.1 billion, twice the amount it was valued at in 2017, when Carlyle Group acquired a 50 percent stake in the company. But anyone who spends any time on Grailed or eBay could tell you about Supreme's ability to appreciate in value. The brand's Thursday drops are known to draw a reliable crowd of brand faithfuls and savvy resellers alike.

The rise of cryptocurrencies and NFTs is a logical extension of the sort of alchemic cultural connection the brand naturally arrives at. The Bored Ape Universe could only aspire to the allure of Supreme's signature box logo. Even under more corporate ownership, the brand finds ways to retain its fierce independence. Like when it released a collaboration with AirStream, the trailer manufacturer, for a full-on mobile home; or a partnership with JBL for special-edition speakers. Supreme finds ways to make sense on an emotional level. It's why, at a time when other clothing brands were busy posting black squares, it decided to shoot and direct a video in which Williams tells the story of New York's Hart Island, an area near the Bronx where many anonymous victims of the city's AIDS epidemic are believed to be buried. Supreme is more than happy to say what's on its mind, even if you might not like it.

QUINTA BRUNSON

The actress and writer behind the hit series 'Abbott Elementary' is quietly revolutionizing television

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH

HOT COMEDIAN

QUINTA BRUNSON — CREATOR, executive producer, and star of the hit comedy *Abbott Elementary* — could moonlight as a tour guide. She meets me at the Warner Bros. Television building on a crisp day in April. The building, tucked behind bushes and an open-air set of a quaint L.A. street, is boxy and drab, one of the least magnificent structures I see on the lot. And yet Brunson has a way of showing its hidden magic.

Flanked by a publicist and a studio rep, we load into a golf cart, where Brunson leads me on a tour of the WBT campus — it also just happens to be a tour of one of the most exciting young careers in comedy.

In 2018, she was cast as a lead in a CW series called *The End of the World as We Know It* after auditioning in this very building. The show never went to air, like two other television shows Brunson successfully sold before *Abbott*.

Brunson's current project is on a very different trajectory. By its second episode, *Abbott Elementary* gave ABC its highest ratings for a comedy since the series finale of *Modern Family* almost two years prior. The show is a workplace mockumentary following determined teachers in a public, underfunded Philadelphia school of mostly Black students. At its best — which the show seems to operate exclusively at — *Abbott Elementary* picks up where *The Office* or *Parks and Recreation* left off, presenting fully developed characters who resemble regular people. The show finds humor in the solidarity of a thankless job, offering the kinds of genuine laughs that might provide a glimmer of light on an otherwise hellish workday.

While it features tons of smart, witty, adorable children, *Abbott Elementary* centers on the teachers doing their best to serve them with limited resources. Brunson plays Janine Teagues, a doggedly optimistic but direly insecure 25-year-old second-grade teacher. The show quickly became a critical darling, surprising even Brunson at times. "I worried before every single episode of *Abbott* aired," she says. "I'd ask my partner, 'What do you think, is this good? We thought it was a good episode, but is it?' Then, I was proven wrong each week." The series was renewed for a second season in March.

As we make our way to the *Ellen* soundstage, where Brunson is scheduled for a sit-down with the day's guest host, NBA star Dwyane Wade, we drive through an outdoor set of trees, bushes, and a 10,000-square-foot lagoon, currently a dry, dusty shell of itself. Known as "the Jungle," Brunson's WB rep says, it's the only set of its kind in Hollywood.

Our next stop, Stage 16, is where most of *Abbott Elementary* was filmed. It's a towering rectangular warehouse; the tallest soundstage in North America. For the show, they built the interior of a school inside, based on the actual school where they shot the pilot. We find it almost completely empty, save for a few workers hanging out near the entrance.

"People were very confused when we first got here," Brunson says. "They were like, 'Why is there a show about a school on Stage 16?' We were getting dirty looks from around the lot." Eventually, though, the 400 kids in and out of the set became beloved around the studio.

Like her show's central character Janine, Brunson, 32, is a Philly native. Her father managed parking lots in nearby Delaware, while her mother taught in Philadelphia public schools for 40 years. She was even her kindergarten teacher. Also like Janine, Brunson went to Philadelphia public schools, including two specialty high schools. At one, she learned engineering and became interested in designing amusement-park rides. At the other, she specialized in the arts.

As a child, Brunson knew that she wanted to write and perform comedy, but it didn't seem realistic for most of

PHOTOGRAPH BY **PHYLICIA J. L. MUNN**

THE

THE HOT LIST

HOT DIY VIDEOGRAPHER

HATE5SIX

Tireless YouTuber Sunny Singh is bringing hardcore to the masses

ONE OF Sunny Singh's proudest moments was the night he got punched in the face with his own camera. Singh was filming a DIY hardcore show in Baltimore, when a would-be stage diver swung his arms wildly, shoving Singh's camera square into his mouth and breaking two of his teeth in the process. "As much as that sucked, it really conveyed the feeling of 'This show is crazy,'" recalls Singh, mastermind of the fast-growing YouTube concert archive hate5six.

For fans of heavy music worldwide, Singh's videos deliver that sensation like a daily vitamin. Since hate5six launched in 2008 — the name is a play on 856, an area code for southern New Jersey, where Singh, 36, grew up — he's uploaded close to 5,000 videos, nearly all of which he filmed himself. (Last year, Charli XCX's team recruited Luis Aponte, drummer for Philly hardcore band Jesus Piece, to perform with the star on *Saturday Night Live* after her team spotted him in a hate5six video.)

Singh traces much of the scrappy approach and activist ethos of hate5six back to Rage Against the Machine. The son of Indian immigrants, he saw some of himself in them. "As a brown kid growing up in a white New Jersey suburb, seeing a heavy band on TV with two unapologetic men of color made me feel like I had a home in that genre," he says.

Singh has big dreams — he wrote Rage's management asking to document their summer reunion tour — but his allegiance is still with the underground. "People will call me a tastemaker," he says. "I don't think I'm a tastemaker because I will literally go film Turnstile playing in front of 2,000 people, but then the next night I'll go film [a] band playing their first show in front of 10 people."

HANK SHTEAMER

KURT FOWLES

her life. There were only a handful of Black women comics to look up to, and her parents preferred that she do something more traditional anyway.

Brunson would stay in Philadelphia for college, where she studied advertising and broadcast telecommunications at Temple University. She also participated in theater and improv.

After dropping out of Temple University in her junior year, Brunson worked at an Apple store in Philly and enjoyed it. When she moved to L.A. to pursue comedy, she transferred to a store there. It was around the same time she began to gain traction posting skits online. Brunson's early videos have by now reached more than 1 billion people on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

In one skit, from 2014, she plays "The Girl Who's Never Been on a Nice Date" and is thus impressed by a man buying a bundle of snacks for her at the movies. "He got money," Brunson's character memorably declares, exaggerating each syllable. Even if you've never seen the original clip, you've likely seen it in GIF form across the internet.

"Part of the ethos of curiosity and creation IS 'LET'S FIND OUT.'"

She was eventually hired by BuzzFeed Video and worked there at the height of its popularity, creating and starring in shorts and quick series for the media company before making three more elaborate shows under its umbrella. Those web series prepped her to create, write, and sell two shows to major networks after leaving the company.

The first was about a dubious girlboss at the head of a fictional media company, one not unlike BuzzFeed. The other, *Quinta and Jermaine,* was sold to CBS and centered on a pair of friends (Brunson and actor-comedian Jermaine Fowler) living in Washington, D.C., who must navigate an accidental pregnancy together.

Television veteran Larry Wilmore – who created *The Bernie Mac Show,* co-created Issa Rae's *Insecure,* was a consulting producer on *The Office,* and wrote for *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* – came on as executive producer. Together, they honed Brunson's ability to make high-level network TV. Brunson's hopes for *Quinta and Jermaine* exemplified her commitment to making television with nuanced, relatable Black characters.

She recalls early hurdles with CBS. Like the matter of her character's mode of transportation. "I wanted her to ride the bus. She was working at the museum," Brunson says. Network executives objected to that. Why? "They thought that looked too poor to be enjoyable," she explains. "Because they were like, 'Can she be in a Nissan?' It was anything they could do to not have this character on the bus. That socioeconomically represented something too unenjoyable to watch.

"I get along with these executives, but it's not about that," Brunson says plainly. "They're still racist. It's the comfortable racism that comes from being at a company like CBS for so long that only leads to shows that are like *The Neighborhood,* that are confronting race relations more than they're about Black people."

She had learned via her scripted BuzzFeed series that she could specialize in making shows about Black people across different walks of life that embrace their Blackness without making it the crux of the characters. "Like, here is how we talk and here's us having the regular human stories that every other human has, that kind of shit," she says.

To Wilmore, this is Brunson's gift. "Many times television gets caught up in showing the extraordinary experience – everything from *The Kardashians* to *Succession* – [of] people that have extraordinary lives that we could never relate to, but [with] Brunson, there's a humanity to her that is very relatable," he says. "And it seems simple, but sometimes a simple thing like that can be a revolutionary act."

Brunson was intentional about making *Abbott* weekly, rather than delivering all of the season at once. "You finish a whole show and it's just like binge eating, binge drinking," she explains. "It's fine in theory, but it's not fun."

When Brunson and I meet, the *Abbott* writers room is a week and a half out from picking back up, and she's eager to get back to it. "I'm ready to make better television," she says. "I love my writers room." She lists three factors that weighed heavily on the process of hiring writers: They cared about comedy, they were kind, and they had a healthy relationship with education. In turn, many of the show's writers have intimate relationships with teachers and school staff – they are their siblings, parents, uncles.

She still thinks about her time working at Apple. "Something that stuck with me from that world was, if someone asks you a question and you don't know the answer to it, instead of making up an answer, you go, 'I don't know. Let's find out.' Part of the ethos of curiosity and creation is [that]," she says. "People have been asking questions like, 'What exactly is going to happen in Season Two?' and stuff, and I'm like, 'I'm going to get to my writers room, and we're going to figure it out because it's a really creative, powerful room.'"

While some of the *Abbott* adults' flaws are more apparent than others – take the mostly selfish principal Ava Coleman, played by comic Janelle James, who used emergency funds to plaster a new school sign with her image on it to the building – they each get the space to be as complicated as real-life adults actually are. The show's characters are funny because they feel fleshed out, even as vehicles for a barrage of well-timed jokes. And while Janine's drive can cause as many problems as Ava's callousness, if there's a villain in *Abbott Elementary,* it's the systemic disadvantages the teachers are working against.

Brunson and her siblings grew up in a three-story row home in West Philly, but moved [*Cont. on 136*]

STILLZ

The 23-year-old music-video director, who got his start as a photographer for artists like J Balvin, has helmed some of the most striking videos over the past couple of years. Here, he talks about some of his key projects so far

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

HOT VISIONARY

Bad Bunny VETE

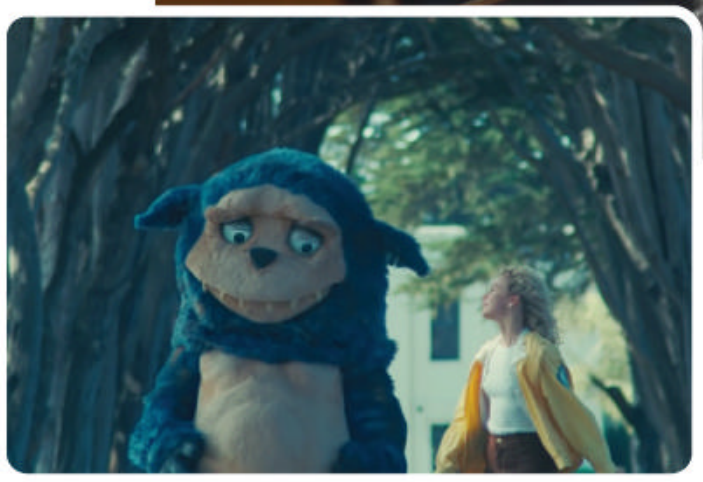
After Bad Bunny saw an unreleased music video Stillz did for the Puerto Rican artist Mora, he asked Stillz to direct "Vete," which would become his first big-budget introduction to the world. "I was super nervous," Stillz says. "'Vete' was honestly a mixture of what the song was saying and some references that we found in some photo books and from a photographer that I really love, Jason Peterson.... In my videos, there's a lot of references from painters, and also from old movies and things that I like."

Omar Apollo feat. Daniel Caesar
INVINCIBLE

Apollo sent Stillz his song "Invincible," and the two of them came up with a trippy video that follows two characters entering an otherworldly afterlife after a drug overdose. "We shot on a smaller format film — 16 — so it could be more grainy and grittier," Stillz says. "Later, with all this afterlife stuff, we shot on super-clean film, and we really pushed the saturation and made it really colorful. Andrés Gudiño is the artist [who made the masks]. Omar was just like, 'Let's do something with this.'"

Tainy feat. Julieta Venegas and Bad Bunny
LO SIENTO BB:/

Megaproducer Tainy and Stillz realized this collaboration with bittersweet visuals about a blue monster and the love of his life. "This was shot over the span of three or four months. We started to think about puppets, and that's when the idea of a *Where the Wild Things Are*-inspired monster came," Stillz says. "I had been watching a lot of Spike Jonze movies. I like those heartbreaking stories that don't have a happy ending."



Lil Nas X THAT'S WHAT I WANT

"Nas had sent the idea, and it was genius. What I like about him is that he has a really clear vision, and he's not afraid to take risks and do crazy things," Stillz says. "We wanted to capture everything from a cinematic point of view, and make sure it felt like you're watching a movie. The whole church thing and everything, those were his ideas. I think my job was just to tell the story the best way possible."

ROCK IN NIGERIA

A maligned genre makes a comeback

HOT SCENE

IN 2013, Bianca Okorocha, a Nigerian artist who performs as Clayrocksu, received a DM from a Twitter follower. It was an invitation to Metal and Romance, a party in Lagos focusing on rock music – a genre long plagued by negative stereotypes in Nigeria. When she got there, she couldn't believe what she saw: a whole community of fellow rock fans. "It was one of the happiest moments of my life," she recalls. Though rock thrived in Nigeria in the Seventies, after the Nigerian Civil War, it quickly faded in popularity. In the country's hyper-religious society, some branded the genre as evil, or a manifestation of the occult. But Nigerian acts like Okorocha's Clay and the Misfits, metal band 1 Last Autograph, and the punk-inspired Oma Mahmud are leading a new wave. With artists like Burna Boy entering the Western pop mainstream, could Nigerian rock be the next breakout sound? Okorocha thinks so. "If we can combine the rock that we love with Afrobeats," she says, "it may go a long way." **AMA UDOFA**

Clay and the Misfits are bringing back Nigerian rock.

HOT DIRECTORS

ADAMMA & ADANNE EBO

Identical-twin filmmakers make their feature debut

THIS PAST SUNDANCE, *Honk for Jesus. Save Your Soul* heralded the ascendance of a sharp, funny filmmaking voice. Two voices, actually: Identical twins Adamma and Adanne Ebo, 31-year-old double Geminis from Georgia who grew up playing basketball at the same house of worship where their film was shot.

As children, Adamma and Adanne attended church services two or three times a week. On the other days, they read *Harry Potter,* which, like Halloween — "the devil's holiday," Adamma jokes over Zoom from Atlanta, where she's currently directing a show created by Donald Glover — was forbidden by the church for promoting magic and evil.

"We remember the pastor dedicated an entire sermon to the evils of *Harry Potter,*" Adanne adds from the twins' home in Inglewood. When their Sunday-school teacher preached no sex before marriage, it was Adanne who raised her hand and asked what counted as sex. "I got in trouble for it!" she yelps. "They discouraged asking questions, which was antithetical to how we were raised."

Part of a highly educated Nigerian American family (their father is a dentist and their mother has a Ph.D. in molecular biology), the Ebo twins decided in middle school they'd become lawyers. Then, on the day of their LSAT, Adanne glanced over at Adamma's desk and caught her daydreaming about *Kiki's Delivery Service,* the 1989 Hayao Miyazaki cartoon. They realized they would have to split up: Adanne to Northwestern's Pritzker School of Law in Chicago; Adamma to UCLA for an MFA in directing. "It was traumatic," Adamma says. "We had to learn how to not see each other every day."

Adamma knew she loved to write and direct. But she loathed the mechanics of getting a film made. So when Adanne graduated from law school and plunged into her own career crisis, it was her turn to get the hard sell to go Hollywood and produce her sister's short films. Their feature debut, *Honk for Jesus. Save Your Soul* stars Regina Hall and Sterling K. Brown as Trinitie and Lee-Curtis Childs, the first lady and pastor of the fictional Wander to Greater Paths Baptist Megachurch in Atlanta. Preaching has made the Childs rich. But Lee-Curtis' sexual misconduct has also made them pariahs.

"From our experience, things are way more complex and way messier than people give them credit for," Adamma says. "Maybe it'll be received in the way that we want, which is simply for people to do what we were doing our entire lives: asking questions."

The Ebos' clothes and hair coordinate. Even their Instagram posts tend to match, and on Halloween, their costumes always share a nerdy fangirl theme, like Underrated Animated Villains or Black Heroes on Their Day Off. On set, the Ebos gave the crew a cheat code to tell them apart. Adamma wore her hair in pink braids; Adanne, in blue. They aren't the first identical-twin filmmakers. Still, since most sibling duos are brothers (see the Coens, the Safdies) jointly helming their own companies, Ejime Productions — meaning "twins" in Nigerian — already makes the Ebos an unusual tag team in the eyes of the industry. "'One woman, we'll let it slide,'" Adamma says, laughing. "'Two? Like, this is a whole lot, guys.'" **AMY NICHOLSON**

FROM TOP: KIM NEWMONEY; EFE EDOSIO

HOT REVIVAL

DRUM-AND-BASS

The U.K. dance genre could be 'the new Motown'

BY MICHAELANGELO MATOS

FOR YEARS, the truism ran that drum-and-bass, despite pockets of true believers across the nation, would, in America, remain a specialty taste within electronic music, never mind in pop. But recently the sound has risen sharply in visibility. The believers can at least partially thank TikTok.

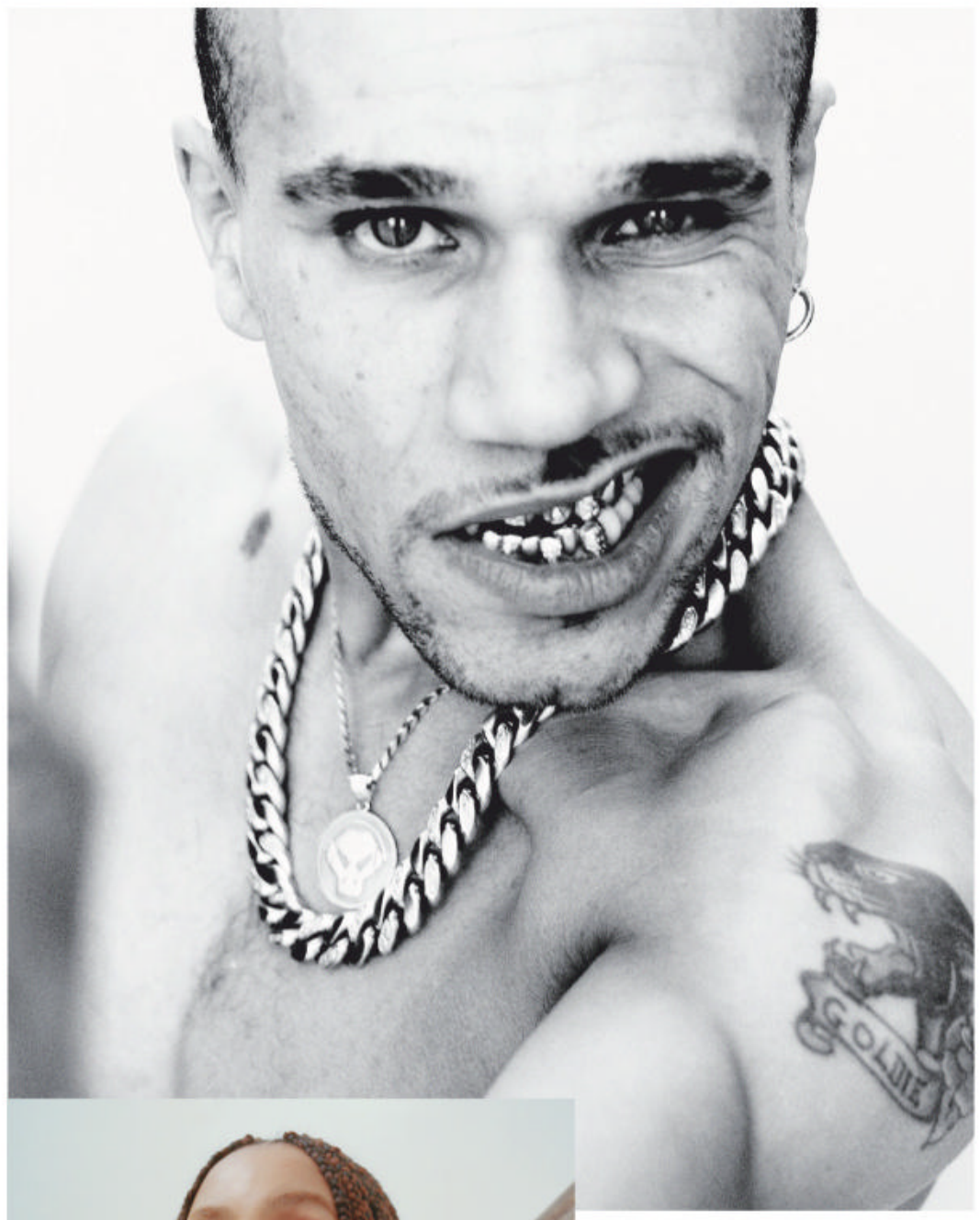
The young British vocalist and producer PinkPantheress sampled Adam F's drum-and-bass classic "Circles" for her viral hit "Break It Off," and Piri, whose sprightly, slinky, liquid D&B single "Soft Spot" has more than 13 million plays on Spotify.

Still, the revival has been slowly bubbling over within the DJ world. "I was fortunate enough to have packed-out rooms with people absolutely losing their shit," says London DJ Sherelle, whose 2020 edition of BBC Radio 1's Essential Mix was voted the top set of the year, the day after her U.S. tour finale in New York. "People might [once] have said, 'You can't go to the U.S. and play this.' Now, you can absolutely do it."

When it began three decades ago, drum-and-bass was known as jungle. It was built on rolling break beats that were considered wildly fast because it pushed past 140 beats per minute, far above house music's 120-BPM groove. By the Nineties, the music began paring down to rhythmic basics – a staggered two-step beat replaced the rolling breaks – and sped up to 170 BPM, allowing dancers to skank along to the sludgy, half-time bass lines.

U.K. artists have long offered interpretations of imported Black musical styles. But drum-and-bass was Britain's first indigenously produced Black genre. "When it's music of Black origin, you feel a sense of pride," says Sherelle. "Drum-and-bass is very intrinsically a part of the U.K. blueprint, the DNA of it all."

Drum-and-bass also lives comfortably in a U.K. musical lineage that encompasses Soul II Soul, Amy Winehouse, and PinkPantheress. "You could go to a majority-Black club tonight and hear dancehall, R&B, U.S. hip-hop, and drum-and-bass classics as part of a standard night out," says Joe Muggs, author of the U.K. sound-system's oral history *Bass, Mids, Tops*. In Britain, he adds, "drum-and-bass was always part of pop culture – you would hear it on TV bumpers, idents on adverts."



Goldie, PinkPantheress, and London DJ Sherelle (from top) have been speeding up the beats — and their music is getting more and more popular.

That's integral to D&B's intergenerational appeal. "I've just been on a film shoot, and somebody said, 'My dad played me this music,' " actor and D&B pioneer Goldie recalls with a warm laugh. It's more evidence that in the U.K., drum-and-bass has become, as he puts it, "the new Motown."

It's not just in the U.K. Crucial to drum-and-bass' increasing American profile is a greater understanding of it as Black music in the U.S. "Drum-and-bass experienced the same thing as Detroit techno – a whiter audience embraced it, and it got written off as a 'white' genre and dismissed by the Black audience here as such," says Sinistarr, the popular Detroit drum-and-bass DJ and producer. "Nowadays, there are way more American Black D&B producers than ever, and that group is constantly growing."

So are the number of women. A key factor has been EQ50, a female collective in London dedicated to gender parity in the drum-and-bass world that launched in 2018. "That's been a beautiful thing to watch," says Sherelle, who credits EQ50 for having "allowed people like myself and others to feel super comfortable in the scene. D&B has been quite a male-dominated scene for a very long time." Now, she says, there is a "new wave of women and non-binary people coming through."

The D&B surge is also part of a general loosening of genre in dance music across the board. "My generation got it like, 'You're in your micro-genre and you're not leaving it,' " says L.A.-based producer-DJ Claude VonStroke (Barclay Crenshaw), who has regularly booked D&B at his Dirtybird Campout parties since 2015. (Goldie is appearing this year.) "I don't think it's like that anymore." Multi-genre DJ'ing has "become the default – I'd say it's more of an anomaly to have a DJ known for just one style lately," says Kristin Malossi, a.k.a. DJ Voices, a resident on Brooklyn's the Lot Radio.

Increasingly more than genre, beats per minute tend to regulate what and how DJs play. For years, techno tended to be played in the 130- to 135-BPM range, but starting in the late 2010s, DJs began pushing it past 150. (For reference, Avicii's "Levels" is 126 BPM and Darude's "Sandstorm" is 136 BPM.) A signal moment came in 2019, when the Boiler Room DJ set by Sherelle, one of D&B's most prominent flag flyers, went viral. It showed, she says, "that people have an appetite for things going faster."

FROM TOP: PHIL KNOTT/CAMERA PRESS/REDUX; CHARLOTTE HADDEN/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; ISAAC LAMB

CONAN GRAY

HOT POP PHEMON

Pop's oversharing next-big-thing on his rough childhood, buddy Olivia Rodrigo, and getting the hell off the internet

BY TOMÁS MIER

CONAN GRAY SAYS he's always been a watch-from-the-sidelines kind of guy. A "non-participator," as he puts it, the kind of person who lives vicariously through those around him. "I just watch people," he says with a shrug, sipping a cold brew (no milk, no sugar) outside of his favorite coffee shop in L.A.'s Eagle Rock neighborhood. "I feel like I'm just an observer of life."

"Non-participator" seems like a weird way for this particular 23-year-old to describe himself. We're talking about a platinum-selling pop star who just put on a captivating set in the blazing desert sun on Coachella's main stage, then walked down the Met Gala red carpet in an angelic Valentino outfit that matched his delicate and gender-fluid fashion.

But, chatting with Gray – today wearing a black bomber jacket over a thrifted baseball tee, and black sunglasses in his hair to keep the curls out of his eyes – you get a sense of why he's seen his life that way. Maybe it's some impostor syndrome kicking in for the Japanese-American Swiftie, who survived a tough childhood in Middle of Nowhere, Texas, that could've easily halted his dreams of becoming, well, anything. Or perhaps it's that Gray reached a new level of fame during a pandemic (his debut, *Kid Krow,* came out in March 2020) that rewarded him for, as he puts it, "just sitting in bed."

Sitting in bed is rapidly becoming less of an option these days, since Gray is poised for big things this year. He's a songwriter with a penchant for brutal honesty and a natural ability to connect to a young generation of overthinkers. But *Kid Krow* was a mere introduction to the intricacies of a boy trying to navigate the mysteries of young love. (Up until a few months ago, he says, he "didn't really date.") Due June 24, his excellent new album, *Superache*, goes deeper. It acknowledges his romantic failure, rips apart the monthslong sulk that followed it, and opens up like never before about his childhood. "Writing this album was miserable, and that's why it ended up being a super-accurate depiction of my life," he says. "It felt like scraping my ribs of any last bits of meat."

The album marks a shift from the simple and angsty lyricism of his debut. "With *Kid Krow*, I was very much like, 'Hi, I am Conan, nice to meet you. These are some things that happened. My heart has been broken before, when I was a teenager,' " he says, shaking an invisible hand. "But then with this album, it's like, 'I had a really bad childhood. I'm in a lot of pain,' " he says in a deep, old man voice, before letting out a giggle.

That childhood was filled with volatility. Gray was born in Southern California, but soon his mother moved the family to her native Japan to care for her ailing father. His dad's military career sometimes kept him apart from the family, and when Conan was three, not long after the family returned to the States, his parents divorced. Following the split, Gray and his sister divided their time between his parents. He moved "about a billion" times, as he said in a 2016 video, sharing tiny apartments with his sister and mom; the trio once even shared a queen-size bed. In school, Gray was often bullied by his mostly white classmates, sometimes for his mixed-race identity.

Inspired by "childhood trauma and generational trauma," and his rough upbringing, Gray wrote "Family Line," the centerpiece of *Superache*. "It felt like something I needed to say to build a true representation of who I am," he tells me. "And the fact that I didn't have the best childhood is not something that I'm afraid to talk about to my friends. I wasn't going to put it on the album at all, but I ended up playing it for some people and it ended up being all of their favorites. I felt like I kind of owed it to the people who listened to the songs to be honest about my life."

Gray says he's terrified for the world to hear "Family Line," but "music isn't supposed to make you feel comfortable all the time," he says. "I think that's why I decided to put it on [the album], because I do feel a bit alone sometimes in my life and in my past. I think it's hard to find people that I relate to when it comes to having a rough childhood. I felt like it was important to say." ("Family Line" includes lyrics about domestic abuse, though Gray has not confirmed that they apply specifically to his family.)

For Gray, writing is coping. And it helped to have someone like producer Dan Nigro – who worked on Gray's debut album and produced Olivia Rodrigo's

STYLING BY KATIE QIAN. GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE. SHIRT BY ETRO

PHOTOGRAPH BY **JUSTIN J WEE**

THE HOT LIST

HOT SOCIAL TREND

BORING TIKTOK

Showing love to the mundane things in life

AUSTIN CHUI (@Austinchui) began making videos as a way to hold himself accountable in his pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. "When hundreds of thousands of people are watching your videos, you cannot be lazy," says Chui, 21, whose videos — often just him preparing to go to the gym — are part of a uniquely soothing trend: creators luxuriating in the mundane details of everyday life. (You can find many such videos under the #dailyvlog hashtag.) Some creators choose to share specific moments that bring them joy. @Lovethetillerys, an Atlanta-based family of four, aim to inspire other Black couples through their Instagram and TikTok. Whether they are shopping for groceries, playing with their children, or attending to chores around the house together, the goal is to ensure that young Black couples are able to see their lives reflected in theirs.

Nabela Noor (@Nabela) started her popular collection, known as Pockets of Peace, during quarantine. "I wanted to put out content that felt like a breath of fresh air amidst the noise and chaos," she says. The videos are vignettes of small moments of joy, like lighting a candle or pouring a glass of water." Noor's Pockets of Peace videos have garnered more than 1 billion views. NELSON C.J.

Nabela Noor, a.k.a. @Nabela

CONAN GRAY

smash-hit debut *Sour* – by his side. "He's been a bit of a mentor or a dad to me," Gray says of the producer.

Nigro was the first person to invite Gray, then a YouTuber who posted from his childhood bedroom and briefly from his UCLA dorm room, into a real studio. "He told me he had never sung on a microphone on a mic stand," Nigro says. "I've never dug in with somebody from the ground up, and it's been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Whenever he brings an idea, it feels distinctly him, and I can help bring it out in the best way possible. His DNA is so specific."

THERE'S ANOTHER PART of his past Gray has been thinking long and hard about recently: his relationship with the internet. In high school, he built a devoted following on YouTube by sharing self-edited drawing videos, life updates, and clips of himself playing the ukulele. His tweets were often streams of consciousness reflective of a carefree, oversharing Gen Zer.

As a high school senior, Gray released his first song, "Idle Town," and its DIY video, a nostalgic ode to the stillness of his hometown and the close friends he made there, laced with a yearning hope to get out. Just a quarter into UCLA, he'd leave school, sign to Republic Records, and release his EP, *Sunset Season*. Then came *Kid Krow* and the rise of "Heather," about envying a girl who was just too perfect, which went two-times platinum and became an anthem for a generation of young adults (and TikTok addicts) just like him.

"Writing this felt like scraping my ribs of any LAST BITS OF MEAT."

But as the song blew up during the summer of 2020, the internet suddenly became a dark place for Gray: Trolls fabricated a rumor that he had worn blackface, others resurfaced a video from a 13-year-old Conan saying he "looked Mexican" because of a dark tan, and some criticized his use of emojis that they deemed didn't match his skin color.

Gray would address the backlash in a Twitter thread in July 2020, accepting responsibility for some of the things he had said as a tween while also acknowledging that some things were just untrue. Since then, Gray has stayed mostly absent from digital life (or at least from Twitter).

"It was a total invasion of my privacy. It was horrifying. That's when I was like, 'You really have to take it with a grain of salt and decide what's going to affect you and what's not going to affect you,' because I was letting all of it affect me," Gray says. "I was going insane. No matter how low, I thought I was just getting kicked further and further."

Gray says he's since learned to "really respect" the internet and the "extremely powerful tool" that it can be, but opts to just spend a few hours on TikTok a day and simply stay quiet. "I've really learned to take a step back from the internet and focus on people who purely love you."

Among those people is his bestie, Olivia Rodrigo. They met in early 2021 and bonded over their adoration for Taylor Swift, the lyrical matriarch Gray once said "raised" him. It was around that time that Swift had her "two kids" share a snippet of her rerecorded "You Belong With Me," with the two friends re-creating an iconic scene from its video.

Since then, the pair have attended award shows and the Met Gala together, and recently performed a duet to Katy Perry's "The One That Got Away" during Rodrigo's *Sour* tour. But when no one's watching, their friendship mostly consists of "just ordering a bunch of food and watching movies."

"I very much value quality over quantity in my life," Gray says. "With Olivia, she's someone that I just adore. And it's always nice to have friends that you can depend on. [Fame] is a very confusing thing, and it's nice to have people that you can relate to and find comfort in."

It's fitting, then, that the fourth track on the album is titled "Best Friend," dedicated to the core set of besties (including his high school best friend Ashley) he's surrounded himself with throughout his life. "You're just as psycho as me/Just as sick inside the head/So when they ask, I've always said, 'That's my fucking best friend,'" Gray sings on the sweet, guitar-backed ode.

"I don't know if it's super-healthy to depend on your friends as much as I do. It's really the only way I feel like I've made it through anything," Gray says. "If it wasn't for my friends in high school I don't think I would have survived. . . . Obviously, I go to therapy as well, but my friends are everything to me. I call them and I text them and I visit them, and I really rely on them a lot."

WHEN YOU'RE SIPPING coffee with someone who writes so well about heartbreak, it's hard to not tell him about your own. As we talk about his Coachella performance and his flowy, bubblegum-pink outfit, I admit to Gray that I watched his set – and his debut performance of "Memories," about wanting a former love to stay away and let him heal – while standing next to my own ex. Gray isn't here for it.

"Why would you do that to yourself? What's wrong with you?" he yells at me, his voice rising with every word. "You're a masochist!"

He's right, and I deserved the scolding. But frankly, we're in the same boat, Conan! Take "Footnote," which he wrote after watching *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time, bawling his eyes out when he realized reality is far from the film's fictional romance. "It's about accepting the fact that somebody that I had feelings for didn't have feelings for me back, and that I was OK with it," he says of the song, on which he sings, "I'll just take a footnote in your life/And you could take my body/Every line I would write for you."

"It's a little embarrassing realizing you don't really mean anything to someone that you really, really adore and really, really love and want to care about you," he says. [*Cont. on 137*]

KINNA SHAFFER

HOT STATEMENT

GRILLZ

Flashy mouthwear is entering its most artful era yet

BY KYLE RICE

STYLE IS CYCLICAL, and as the media delights in trends like the Miu Miu mini-skirt or cringes at the thought of low-rise jeans, another look has quietly resaturated the music industry: the metallic mouthwear known as grillz.

Grillz, or some archaic version of them, can be dated back to the seventh century B.C., when women wrapped gold wire around their teeth. Over time these wires were replaced by permanent sets, embedded like gold nuggets among rows of pearls. In the Nineties, to find truly original and inspired pieces, you traveled to Queens, seeking out the grillz daddy himself, Eddie Plein, a Suriname immigrant who discovered the trend and became a powerhouse jeweler in the music industry. "Eddie was like the king of New York," Lyle Lindgren, a filmmaker and writer who's been documenting the rise of grillz since the late Eighties, told *Huck* magazine.

But even Plein would show some respect to the grill makers of today, who now span the globe as the digital age has brought their work to a mass market. Their designs are much more elaborate than those of their predecessors, incorporating porcelain or platinum, and are fixed with jewels like opal, topaz, and, of course, diamonds. From L.A. to London to the heart of Japan's hip-hop scene, meet three of the most sought-after jewelers who are shaking things up and crafting pieces that boggle the mind.

ALLIGATOR JESUS

LOCATION LOS ANGELES
CLIENTS BAD BUNNY, LIL NAS X, OZZY OSBOURNE

With artists like Lil Nas X and Bad Bunny proudly flaunting his work, success was inevitable for David Tamargo, a.k.a. Alligator Jesus. Wedding influences from his early days on the road with Insane Clown Posse to his love of film and art, Tamargo's grillz blend the ostentatious designs of the 2000s with an artisanal spirit.

CLOVA RAE-SMITH

LOCATION LONDON
CLIENTS BREE RUNWAY, VTSS

Rae-Smith often finds herself taking a sculptural approach to her grillz, casting her pieces in organic forms that mold themselves to the wearer's teeth, like polished branches of wild ivy.

TETSUYA AKIYAMA

LOCATION JAPAN
CLIENTS A$AP ROCKY, YZERR, YURUFUWA GANG, SWAY, STEVE LACY

For almost two decades, Akiyama has been crafting for Japan's well-known artists like rappers SWAY. But it wasn't until designer A$AP Bari requested a custom set via an Instagram DM that he became a staple name in the industry.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF DAVID TAMARGO/ALLIGATOR JESUS; COURTESY OF CLOVA RAE-SMITH/CLOVA JEWELRY; COURTESY OF TETSUYA AKIYAMA/GRILLZ JEWELZ, 3

THE HOT LIST

MOM ROCK

The alt-power-pop wizards are the best band you've never heard of

HOT BAND

WHEN MOM ROCK were looking for a bassist four years ago, they put out a call on Instagram with some key questions. "They asked if you loved your mom, played bass, and had cool outfits," says Tara Maggiulli. "I didn't know about cool outfits, but I love my mom and I play bass. So I messaged [singer-guitarist Josh Polack] and was like, 'Do you want to jam or something?'"

Maggiulli got the gig, rounding out one of indie rock's most promising young bands. Since forming in 2018 at the Berklee School of Music, Mom Rock have honed an addictive mix of power pop and alt-rock. The first two songs they uploaded to Spotify ("Conversation," "Grand Romantic Life") racked up more than a million plays, and they're about to hit the road in November with the Spill Canvas. As for that name, singer-guitarist Curtis Heimburger proposed it in a group text. "Dad Rock is a common phenomenon," he says. "I had never heard of anyone talk about Mom Rock."

The bandmates graduated college last year and are working day jobs. Next steps: Recording more songs and learning to function as a three-piece after parting with Polack in May, due to creative and personal differences. "It's been good fodder for us," says Maggiulli. "Some of the best songs ever written were breakup songs." **ANDY GREENE**

Mom Rockers Magguilli and Heimburger at New York's Mercury Lounge in March

OVER THE PAST DECADE, one question has consistently floated around Hollywood: What's happening with *Blonde*? Writer-director Andrew Dominik has been developing the upcoming Netflix film, which reimagines the life of Marilyn Monroe, since 2010 – and it's taken nearly that long to cast the seemingly unlikely Ana de Armas as Monroe, in a role that was previously attached to Jessica Chastain and Naomi Watts. Dominik, known for the Brad Pitt feature *Killing Them Softly* and, more relevantly, the long-limbed anti-Western *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, has said that the delays are in part due to budgetary concerns.

Whatever the reason, the delay has only made the project – due this fall – that much more mysterious. The movie adapts Joyce Carol Oates' epic 2000 novel of the same name, and at the very least, we know that Oates has seen it – and given her approval. Last year, Oates called it a "startling, brilliant, very disturbing, and perhaps most surprisingly an utterly 'feminist' interpretation." Perhaps more tellingly, Jamie Lee Curtis, whose father, Tony Curtis, starred alongside Monroe in the classic *Some Like It Hot*, has said that

De Armas goes blond in *Blonde*.

HOT ANTICIPATION

BLONDE

The forever-in-the works reimagining of Marilyn Monroe's life is tantalizing

she was wowed by the cut she's seen. "I dropped to the floor," she told *Vanity Fair*. "I couldn't believe it. Ana was completely gone. She was Marilyn."

Oates' novel largely reconstructs the life of "Norma Jeane" (her middle name's added "e" is an intentional error on the author's part) through her damaged and damaging sexual and romantic relationships with men: Joe DiMaggio, for example, and the playwright Arthur Miller – and, most notoriously, birthday boy John F. Kennedy. Dominik may not seem like the first choice for this project – it being, above all, a film about a woman, helmed by a director whose work to date has pointedly, and often thoughtfully, concerned itself with the psychological vagaries of men. But *Jesse James* might offer a hint of what's to come. That movie was a patient study, not of the Wild West, but of the brain-rotting nature of celebrity, down to the jealousy – the hunger for a claim to fame – that it could inspire. This movie? We have this much to go on: In March, the film was slapped with a rare (exceedingly so, for Netflix) NC-17 rating. At minimum, the delay of its release has only made us that much hungrier to see it. **K. AUSTIN COLLINS**

FROM TOP: NICK KARP; NETFLIX

HOT YOUTUBE DRUM WIZARD

BONHAMOLOGY

How a Chicago dad is pulling off a scarcely believable tribute to rock's greatest drummer

LED ZEPPELIN drum covers aren't exactly a rare commodity. A quick YouTube search turns up a sea of results, from child prodigy Yoyoka Soma nailing "Good Times, Bad Times" to tribute-band members replicating John Bonham's outré *Song Remains the Same* look. But amid the takes on "Ramble On" and "Rock and Roll," you'll find something singular: a man covering not just songs, but entire *concerts* — every monster fill in "Whole Lotta Love," every barehanded smack in the "Moby Dick" solo that went down across the better part of three hours one night in, say, Osaka, Japan, in September 1971.

There's not an ounce of theatricality in the videos George Fludas posts on his Bonhamology YouTube channel. He's an unassuming fiftysomething dad who sets up his kit in his family's Chicago living room; his movements are economical and contained, probably stemming from his main gig as a jazz drummer. But his grasp of Bonham's style — that combination of sledgehammer force and greasy funk — is uncanny. "I feel like [Bonham] was a soul and R&B drummer with a very heavy but very wide dynamic range," Fludas says. "The most significant factor is having a touch. A lot of it is how you hit the drum, how you pull the sound out of the drum."

Fludas spends a couple of weeks immersing himself in a bootleg before trying a playthrough. He then simply cues up the show and goes for it, adhering to a strict no-edits policy. As proud as he is of his full-gig renditions, Fludas seems most fired up about the People's Front of Zeppelin, or PFoZ, a remote cover band he started with guitarist Ivan Jakic and bassist Pete Etxenike that's earned him some encouraging DMs from Jimmy Page's girlfriend, who passed along a thumbs-up from Page. PFoZ essentially conjure their own Zep performances based on their intimate knowledge of the band; watching their nearly 29-minute "Dazed and Confused," you experience the Bonham style not as a series of technical specifications but as a living language. "If you're going to do it for yourself, do it and have fun with it," Fludas says. Then, as if struck by the idiosyncrasy of his Bonhamological research, he adds, "I don't know why the hell I'm doing it," and laughs. "It's kind of a bizarre thing." **HANK SHTEAMER**

FROM TOP: ALLYSON RIGGS/A24; COURTESY OF GEORGE FLUDAS

Poly's all the rage: Yeoh in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

THE MULTIVERSE

Multiple worlds are a boon to storytellers — and a comforting thought as ours goes to hell

HOT ESCAPE

WHETHER YOU, yourself, live in just one of an endless array of alternate universes is, apparently, a topic of actual debate among physicists, even sober ones. But when it comes to fictional worlds, multiverses are taking over, from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (which, come to think of it, might have to change its name), most recently with *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness,* to the brilliant indie film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, in which infinite Michelle Yeohs grapple with life's infinite tragedies.

The appeal of the idea to storytellers and their corporate patrons is obvious. How else would you get Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and Tom Holland to all play Spider-Man in the same movie? How else would you be able to cram Patrick Stewart's Professor Xavier from 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* movies into the MCU? On one hand, the concept opens the door for wilder storytelling; on another, it allows for endless iterations of the same characters and a doorway to painless reboots. There are always more Spider-Men out there.

The many-worlds concept has long been a sci-fi staple, and in comic books was originally best known via Marvel's rival DC, beginning with a legendary September 1961 *Flash* story called "Flash of Two Worlds," which introduced the idea of an Earth-1 and Earth-2, each with its own set of heroes. By 1985, DC editors became convinced that its many alternate worlds – including one where the Nazis won World War II and at least two where all the superheroes were cartoon animals – were too confusing for new readers. DC downsized its cosmos with the apocalyptic miniseries *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* only to shrug and reintroduce the multiverse later. Meanwhile, the idea also popped up in the usual nerdy venues, from *Doctor Who* to *Star Trek* to the underrated 2000s series *Fringe*.

But multiverses have never been so mainstream, and it's hard not to connect the concept's spread with a prevailing sense in recent years that, here on this Earth, we've slipped into what *Community* called "the darkest timeline" – that, in the face of cascading calamities from Trump to Covid to climate change to Julia Fox, we are in the worst of all possible worlds. Which, in turn, creates a powerful yearning for the possibility of better ones.

The trend isn't slowing down. There have already been two separate multiversal Spider-Man movies: 2018's *Into the Spider-Verse,* which got there first, and last year's *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Next year will bring a sequel to the former movie, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*. And over in Warner Bros.' DC Comics cosmos, *The Flash,* due in 2023, will belatedly drag the cinematic versions of the DC characters into their own multiverse, with both Ben Affleck and a 70-year-old Michael Keaton popping up as incarnations of Batman.

And for Warner Bros., which is dealing with *Flash* star Ezra Miller's endless series of arrests and scandals, the multiverse may be a salvation: Execs there are almost certainly at work scouring various realities for one where Flash can be played by a less problematic actor. **BRIAN HIATT**

HOT CITY OF GODS

NEW YORK

Scandela turning an everyday encounter into TikTok gold

After a rough couple of years, the city is as loud, weird, and inspiring as ever

BY JEFF IHAZA

FOR BETTER AND for worse, New York City embodied the devastation and hope of the Covid-19 pandemic early on. The city was among the hardest hit during the initial months of the crisis, and offered a story of resilience in its frontline heath care workers. Two years later, New York is experiencing a ground-level resurgence. Together with a new crop of artists, creatives, rappers, and designers, the city's endlessly inventive residents are adapting to the strangeness of the era. Here's a rough guide to the renaissance.

WHERE SOCIAL MEDIA GETS NYC RIGHT

WHAT COULD A swarm of TikTokers do to New York City that it hasn't already experienced? These days, the app is full of videos from the latest generation of transplants bastardizing neighborhood names, cluelessly treating storied establishments like new discoveries, and presenting a version of the city that couldn't be farther removed from reality. Influencers are hardly ever good spokespeople, anyway.

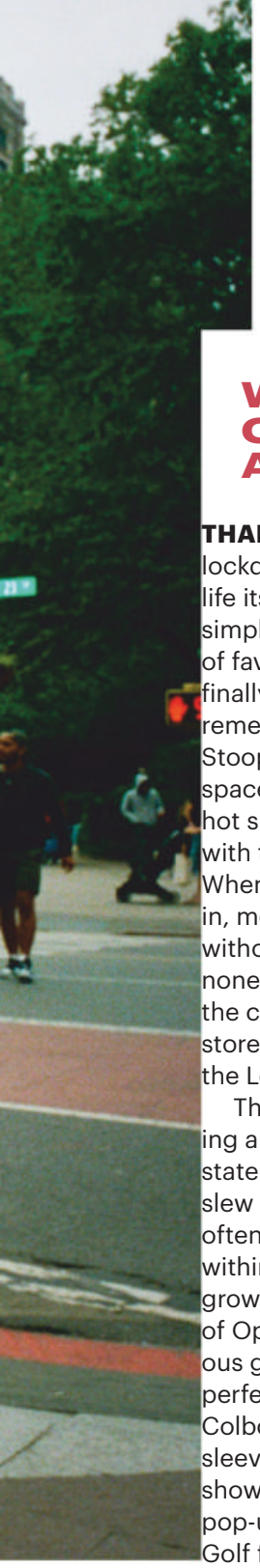
@TWEAKSEASON, a TikTok account started by 25-year-old Rogeri Scandela, is the exception to the hordes of oblivious social media documentarians in the city. His account is a stream-of-consciousness journey into a real New Yorker's psyche. He walks around the five boroughs gently roasting strangers and, more often than not, inanimate objects. In my favorite clip, he stands outside of an imposing office building and sees a man at his desk with a genuinely perplexing number of monitors. "He's analyzing mad data," Scandela riffs, before irresistible semantic satiation takes hold and he questions the very sound of the word "data." Naturally, it's easy to find yourself scrolling Scandela's page for hours.

On a cloudy day in May, I meet him near Madison Square Park, where he's filming TikToks before his shift at a grocery store. He's bold in his approach to street-level observation, wise-cracking on passersby with impressive speed; ornate jokes seem to come to him instantly. "Sometimes I think about it, sometimes it's freestyle," he says of his voice-overs. "But I feel like the freestyle ones are the ones I blow up the most. The ones where it's just natural."

Scandela grew up in Inwood, a neighborhood in Manhattan, and counts his affinity for battle-rap videos as the source of his quick wit. "A lot of people like to clown," Scandela explains. "We call it cutting up." @Tweakseason has a running joke on his page, calling on viewers to "free the commish." His videos sometimes get taken down for violating TikTok's standards, namely around potential bullying and for cursing.

But Scandela's page is nevertheless consistently entertaining, if not slightly mysterious. He never shows his face on camera, and when I ask him why, he explains it to me just as a real New Yorker would: "There's no reason to because I'm recording. It's about the world — it's not about me."

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SINNA NASSERI**



WHERE YOU CAN HANG OUT ANYWHERE

THANKS TO striving millennials, Covid lockdown, and the brutal pace of modern life itself, the time-honored tradition of simply chilling in public has fallen out of favor in recent years, but nature is finally healing, and people in the city are remembering how to simply hang out. Stoops, park benches, and the corners of space between bars are once again viable hot spots, as plenty of citizens make due with the nearest options they can find. When it comes to inviting you to wander in, meander, and make conversation without necessarily buying anything, none of the city's new storefronts have the concept as dialed in as the clothing store/art gallery/coffee shop **COLBO** in the Lower East Side.

The store recently opened, boasting a high-fidelity sound system and state-of-the-art DJ setup. It's host to a slew of independent designers, who are often invited to curate original pop-ups within the expansive space. Colbo has grown into a cultural hub reminiscent of Opening Ceremony, where a previous generation of New York cool kids perfected the art of hanging out. Except Colbo has a more ambitious twist up its sleeve: The store hosts parties and art shows with an experiential flare. A recent pop-up for the menswear brand Whim Golf featured a mini-golf course in the store's back room.

WHERE STYLE ISN'T EXPENSIVE

NEW YORK REMAINS a place where beautifully dressed people seem to just pop out of the woodwork. It is not an uncommon story for new arrivals to abandon a lifetime's wardrobe after coming face-to-face with the city's effortlessly elegant denizens. Despite what the world of luxury fashion might have you believe, you can look like these street muses for a modest amount of money. Real insiders shop at **LARA KOLEJI,** which recently relocated to Lower Manhattan from Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Sort of like a vintage Disneyland, the store carries a curated selection of designer garments from fashion's heyday. There's Nineties Prada alongside Miu Miu and Gaultier, as well as band and rap tees that you'll likely find your favorite musician photographed in.

The key to good style isn't how much you spend but how the clothes you wear make you feel. At Lara Koleji, the price point is shockingly reasonable. For a store carrying so many high-end brands, there isn't an ounce of pretense in the experience. The staff are as in love with the clothes as anyone else and, instead of the stereotypically intimidating experience of luxury shopping, manage to remind you of how good clothes can make you feel. In a move toward more-distinct ways of dressing, a passion for vintage has taken hold in the city. Despite the mayor's efforts, New York isn't a giant strip mall just yet, and stores like Lara Koleji prove it.

Brooklyn rapper and producer Mike

A1 Record Shop in the East Village

WHERE BK STAYS 10 TOES DOWN

RECENTLY, AT A packed-out show in Manhattan, the rapper **MIKE** treated a raucous crowd to a taste of Brooklyn's bubbling underground rap movement. The 23-year-old rapper and producer is based out of the borough, and has been sharing music on Bandcamp since 2015. He's since toured with acts like Freddie Gibbs and Earl Sweatshirt. Mike's serene raps feel like a live broadcast from his spirit, and he's bubbling into the mainstream with a rising generation of young fans. As a producer, he wrangles samples and textures from disparate corners of music and sensation. On his latest album, *Disco!,* he balances emotional resonance with calm, soulful production. Mike has a penchant for emotive, sparse storytelling, and the same can be said for a number of his Brooklyn contemporaries.

KEIYAA, whose 2020 debut, *Forever, Ya Girl,* introduced the Chicago-born singer to the masses, has an innately poetic flare, and her gentle swoon can mask the radical impulse present. Now based in Brooklyn, she spins soulful melodies that never stray from the concerns of Black liberation, gently intertwining with the personal and political. KeiyaA makes a compelling case for refusing to decouple the two, and the result is both transcendent and transformative. It's also a fitting soundtrack for a growing musical sensibility in the borough.

NAVY BLUE, who was formerly a professional skater for the New York powerhouse Supreme, knows a thing or two about poetry as well. Across a string of releases, he's proven to be more than a hobbyist when it comes not only to the craft of hip-hop, but also to liberation. Navy's freewheeling approach to language and narrative shares a lot of tendencies with spoken-word, and there's a spiritual dimension to his music as well. His 2020 debut, *Àdá Irin,* took its name from a Yoruba term for a sacred tool used by the spirit Ògún, and found Navy intent on unearthing inner strength.

WHERE VINYLHEADS MAKE NOISE

NEW YORKERS LIKE music they can touch. How else would you explain the enduring legacy of **A1 RECORD SHOP** in the East Village? Since 1996, the store has remained a staple for DJs, audiophiles, and everyone in between. On a recent Sunday in May, A1 showed no signs of concern around whether it could reach a younger generation. A young Zoomer even scurried around the shop with a notepad, writing down the names of records that he saw. It makes sense that New Yorkers have a taste for vinyl — the format is infused with the kind of tangible history that nearly every street corner in the city is chock full of.

According to a 2021 report from MRC Data (formerly Nielsen-SoundScan), vinyl sales in the United States increased from 21.5 million units in 2020 to 41.7 million in 2021, so the vinylheads who frequent A1 will be around for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the city is crawling with new places to listen to records and argue about the fidelity of the sound. The latest, **NINE ORCHARD** in the Lower East Side, boasts a custom sound system in its expansive lounge area, and **EAVESDROP** in Greenpoint has become one of the city's hottest new bars, in part thanks to a commitment to the old-style "listening room" format of yesteryear.

The cynical view is that all of this is merely empty nostalgia, but if you spend enough time at A1, you'll start to realize it's simply an appreciation of history. The store connects to the city's cultural ancestry. Digging through the crates at A1 could lead you to stumble upon a record played at the influential Mars nightclub in the Nineties, or a test pressing from the legendary house label Shelter Records. The store acts as an archive of history, unencumbered by streaming algorithms or data collection. It's why preserving even these tiny fragments of humanity is more than a hobby for some New Yorkers — it's the meaning of life.

FROM TOP: ERIC HART JR; SETH YAMASAKI

BILLY STRINGS

How the guitar hotshot outran a dark, drug-addled childhood to bring bluegrass to the pop-music mainstream

BY JOSEPH HUDAK

HOT PICKER

BILLY STRINGS backs his black Jeep Gladiator down to the lip of Nashville's Percy Priest Lake and hops out to unhook the tricked-out bass boat he's towing behind him. The heavy sounds of Primus, one of his favorite bands, spill loudly out of the cab, where old Combos wrappers, cigarette butts, and fishing lures are strewn about. Strings, in a Dickies work coat with "Boomer" embroidered over the heart and a "Billy Strings" patch on the opposite side, lets his cigarette dangle from his mouth while he frees the boat from the trailer in a pair of white fishing gloves.

"I love this little fucker," he says, tossing me a line attached to the boat before jumping back into the Jeep to park it nearby. "Just walk it into the water like a dog – and don't let it float away."

Soon, Strings is bounding back down the parking lot, onto the small dock, and behind the wheel of his boat, a 16-foot Tracker he bought as a birthday gift to himself a few years ago. On board, there's about a dozen fishing rods, tackle boxes full of assorted rubber worms and crankbaits, and some egg sandwiches and orange energy drinks he brought to share. The lightning-fingered bluegrass musician is unfailingly considerate. He's also an inveterate bass fisherman.

"I go as often as I can," he says. "Sometimes I'll get home from a long-ass tour and I should probably just go to bed, but instead I put the boat in the water."

The night before, Strings was onstage at the Ryman Auditorium, performing the first of three sold-out headlining shows for a crowd best described as unhinged. For nearly three hours, a mix of tie-dyed hippies, young and old bluegrassers, and jamrock faithful stomped their feet and banged their hands on the pews of the former church; near the end of a particularly fierce jam, one guy shimmied up a balcony column in tribute.

The Ryman concert was a validating milestone for the 29-year-old Strings, a Michigan native who escaped a childhood of poverty and meth use in his small town of Muir ("There's nothing to do there," he says, "that's why everyone gets hooked on drugs") to become one of the most popular live draws of the pandemic era.

In 2019, he kicked off a three-year run of consistently sold-out shows, successfully pivoting to drive-in gigs and livestreams in 2020. Of the top 100 tours of 2021, Strings – signed to the independent label Rounder Records – ranked among the top third. He's also evolved into a festival star, playing high up on the bill at Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza, and headlining the jam-centric Peach Music Festival. In April, Post Malone, a Strings superfan, made a surprise appearance onstage at one of his concerts.

When Strings drove his fishing Jeep home from the Ryman after that first sold-out show and pulled into the driveway of the log-cabin-style house he recently bought outside of Nashville, he broke down in tears.

"I literally patted myself on the back and looked in the rearview mirror and said, 'Good job, kid. You fucking did all right tonight,'" Strings says. "I'm like, 'Dude, everything's good.' I'm taking care of myself, I'm not worrying about where I'm going to get my next meal or pay rent."

At that, Strings guns the boat's throttle and we're off across the lake, heading to a favorite cove to shield us from a mid-morning rainstorm and, if we're lucky, hook some bass.

"I'm not running toward success; I'm running away from poverty," Strings says, pulling down his baseball cap so the wind doesn't blow it away. "I'm running away from being a poor meth head, from living in squalor, having no food in the fridge, having no hot water, from taking a shower in a moldy shower and drying off with a towel that smells like mildew. From wearing dirty clothes to school and being embarrassed to take your shoes off at your friend's house because you're wearing the same socks you've been wearing for days and your feet stink.

"That's why I cried last night," he continues.

To hear Strings, born William Lee Apostol on Oct. 3, 1992, recount moments from his childhood is to suspect he's bullshitting. Primus leader Les Claypool, now a friend and fishing buddy, often tells him, "That sounds made-up," when he finishes a story. Strings laughs, but swears it's all true: how he was born during a bluegrass picking party; how a friend of the family – a hitman – drove his mother to the hospital to give birth ("My mom told me he only killed bad people"); how his grandfather and namesake, drunk on Wild Turkey, decided to install a new garage door by driving his car straight through the rear wall and into the backyard.

"My family is a trip, bro. I come from moonshiner, drug-dealing, partying, rock & rolling folks," he says. "Hillbillies."

Some of those stories are much darker, and more tragic. After his biological father overdosed on heroin when Strings

PHOTOGRAPH BY **DAVID MCCLISTER**

THE HOT LIST

Strings backstage at the Ryman with mandolin player Jarrod Walker

BILLY STRINGS

was two, his mother, Debra, remarried. Strings considers his stepfather, a bluegrass-picking good-timer named Terry Barber, his dad. "Terry raised me and taught me how to wipe my ass, tie my shoes, and play guitar. That's my fucking dad," he says emphatically. For his next project, he's plotting an album of bluegrass classics recorded with Barber.

But as Strings was about to become a teenager, life changed. Both of his parents got hooked on meth, he says, and those regular bluegrass jam sessions devolved into nights of debauchery. "What used to be so beautiful – the camaraderie, the parties, the couple Busch Lights, and a couple joints – turned into meth, hardcore binges, no food in the fridge, and no parents, even though they're sitting right in front of me," Strings says. Disgusted, he moved out of his family's trailer when he was 13.

"I've talked to him quite a bit about his life," Claypool says. "We have similar backgrounds. We kinda come from substance-abuse families and tweakers and whatnot. He's had a lot of these life experiences that are pretty intense."

Seeing the fallout from drug abuse firsthand didn't stop Strings from experimenting with a pharmacy of drugs himself – crack, coke, heroin, and meth, among them. "When I was young and I found out my parents were on meth, I was like, 'Shit, I want to see what's so cool,'" he says. "That's why I did heroin too."

He did heroin only a few times – never with a needle – and stopped after a terrifying hallucination in which he saw death coming for him. These days, Strings' drug of choice is weed. After finishing his egg sandwich, he pulls a red glass bowl out of his pocket, packs it full, and sparks up. He stopped drinking alcohol six years ago, after an especially disastrous gig; and his parents both got clean around the time Strings graduated high school. He bought his mother a house a few months ago.

"A nice-ass house, in our hometown. And it's paid for," he says with a big smile and nod. "I could have bought a fucking Ferrari or some dumb shit, but the first thing I wanted to do was make sure my mom was taken care of."

When Strings was younger, he didn't much care for pop music. When he saw Machine Gun Kelly perform at a Cannabis Cup festival in 2018, he was dumbfounded.

"There were all these big three-part harmonies, and nobody's singing. He's got a drummer and a guitar player and he's playing guitar sometimes, but they're playing over a track. What the fuck is going on?" he says, shortly before landing an impressive smallmouth bass.

But he's become a fan of Machine Gun Kelly, along with artists like Jack Harlow and the late rapper Young Dolph. So what caused him to soften his stance? "Hanging out with Luke Combs and Post Malone," he says. Strings spent a few days writing with Combs at the country superstar's Key West retreat, and they released the bluegrassy collab "The Great Divide" last January. Back in 2020, he hung out with Post Malone at the rapper's Utah compound, hamming it up with a lever-action rifle on Instagram and singing Hank Williams and Johnny Cash songs into the wee hours.

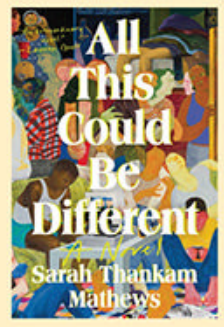
"He's a fucking super-nice guy. Like Del McCoury nice," Strings says, comparing the face-tatted "Circles" singer to the bluegrass great. "You gain respect for somebody who knows every single word to 'Jambalaya (On the Bayou).' It's like, 'Damn, this motherfucker knows more Hank than I do.'"

"Hell ya, what a good night," Malone tells ROLLING STONE in an email when asked if he remembers the jam session. "It was at my house, got some beers and got out the guitars. He was recording in a town not too far from where I live. When I found out, I told him to head over."

[*Cont. on 137*]

SARAH THANKAM MATHEWS

The pandemic helped transform one writer's debut novel



FOR SNEHA, the protagonist of Sarah Thankam Mathews' engrossing debut novel, *All This Could Be Different,* the future seems promising as she lands a job and a free apartment in a new city. But as she forges ahead, the traumatic history she keeps to herself collides with the present. When Mathews began writing the novel in February 2020, she was struggling to write a different book. She took a break and refocused on how she and her Brooklyn neighbors would cope with the growing threat of Covid-19. "What grew out of that anxiety-spiral-meets-moment-of-clarity was I built this online Slack network that was sort of a neighborhood-based mutual-aid network," she says.

What started with a few flyers snowballed into grassroots community assistance. "We supported 23,000 people during those first seven months with a week's worth of groceries," she says of the initiative, named Bed-Stuy Strong. "And by the end . . . we'd raised and redistributed $1.3 million." The project transformed her initial concept for a novel, originally a satire of the modern office, into one more relatable for the times. "I hope more than anything that people take away this idea that each of us is a finite unit of power," she says. "And if you join up all these little finite units of power, we can really move to reshape the society we wish to see." ALTHEA LEGASPI

HOT AUTHOR

FROM LEFT: DAVID MCCLISTER; COURTESY OF SARAH THANKAM MATHEWS

DELTA-8 THC

HOT SEMI-LEGAL HIGH

It's a new way to get baked — but it's largely unregulated, untested, and unstudied

BY ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

A FEW WEEKS ago, toward the end of a hectic workday, a writer – let's call her Sarah – took what she thought was her usual dose of CBD. She had recently been gifted a new bottle from the same brand she always takes, and though the label was different, Sarah didn't really notice. Two hours later, she was a lot more relaxed than she expected to be. "I was eating dinner and suddenly staring into space," she recalls. Her husband was amused; she was worried. Then she realized that what she'd taken wasn't CBD at all, but something called delta-8 THC. It claimed to be just as legal as ultra-mild CBD, but this one got her stoned.

Like well-known delta-9 THC – essentially, weed's active ingredient – delta-8 THC does, as Sarah discovered, get you high. But the products wouldn't exist without its less-intoxicating predecessor. After the 2018 farm bill legalized industrial hemp (defined as cannabis that contains less than .3 percent THC; as opposed to marijuana, which contains a lot more), American producers set to work seeing what they could chemically isolate from the newly legal plant. Mostly, this was CBD. But then, they got creative.

First identified in the 1940s, delta-8, which is naturally present in very small amounts in cannabis, was mostly reserved for animal studies. "Delta-8 THC typically gets made by a synthetic process, which is a cyclization reaction from CBD," says Linda Klumpers, a University of Vermont chemist who co-authored a review of delta-8 studies. By adding acid and solvent to CBD, it changes the molecule, and you get delta-8. No one really took delta-8 seriously until a glut of CBD allowed for experimentation, and led to a whole new range of products that goes beyond just getting high.

The problem with delta-8 products made from industrial hemp, however, is that there are no federal testing requirements – those are implemented on the state level when it comes to delta-9 – so you don't necessarily know what you're getting. Grant Boatman of Canna River – which makes vapes, gummies, and other products that include a variety of hemp-derived cannabinoids – says their products go through rigorous safety testing (lab reports are available on its website), but that can't be said for many on the market. "We go above and beyond to make sure the products that we buy, the raw materials, are all clean," he says. "[But] there's a tremendous amount of bad actors that just don't care."

On top of safety concerns, there's also the problem of whether or not it's actually legal. While some states have made laws specifically outlawing on a federal level the sale of delta-8, advocates claim that since it's derived from a legal substance, it should be allowed; others say that since it's an analogue of a federally controlled substance, it has the same legal standing as delta-9 THC. Shawn Hauser, a Colorado lawyer who specializes in cannabis law, explains it's not really about the legality of the molecule itself. "For products that are interstate commerce and intended for human consumption, they have to be legal under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act," she says. "And delta-8 products are not." But like with CBD, the FDA is so far only cracking down on companies making health claims.

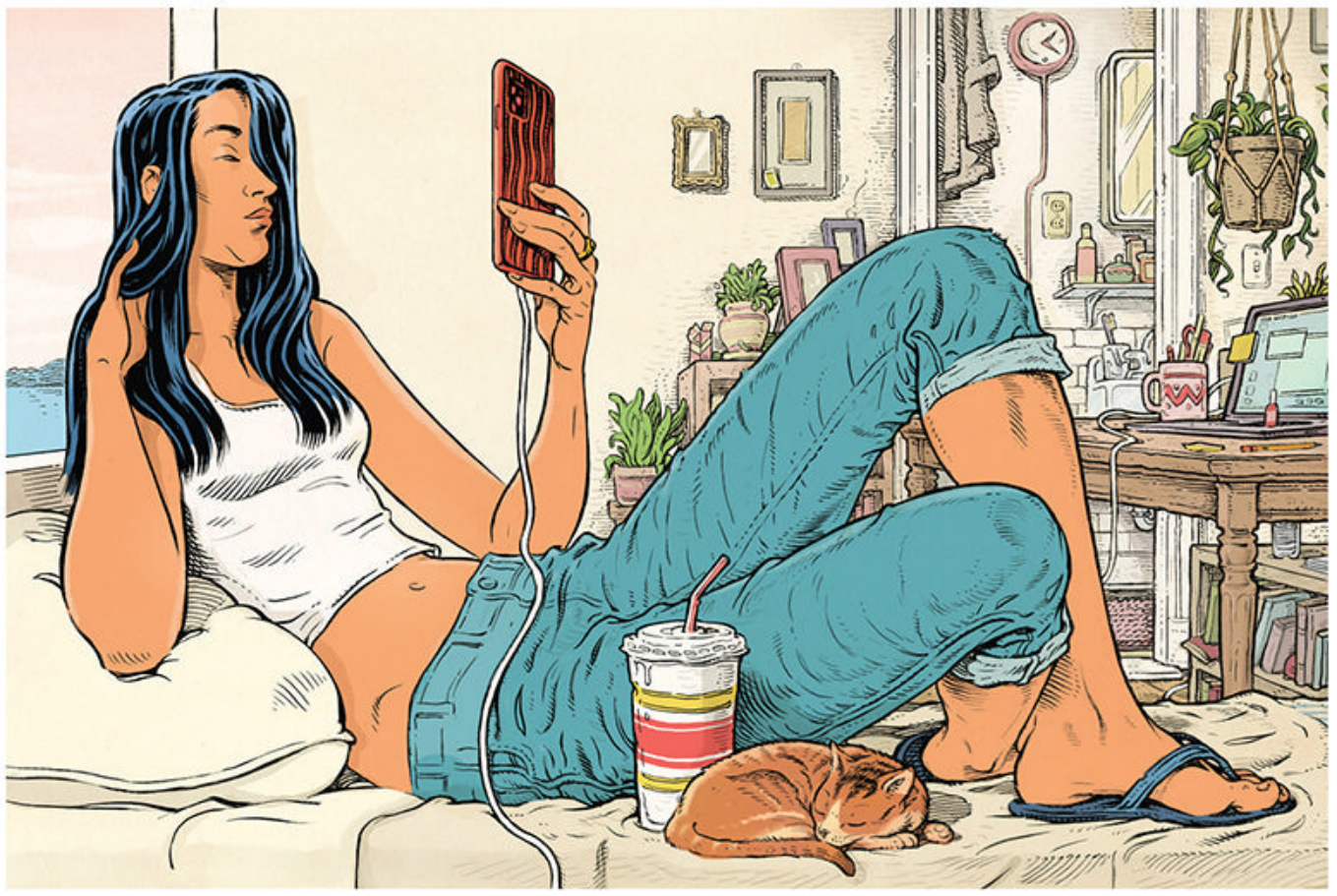
In states with legal weed, some operators have opted to use CBD extracted from marijuana plants, which aren't legal for interstate commerce, but do have the benefit of being part of a regulated market – offering the customer more confidence. "Because of the FDA's absence, these state programs include very robust regulatory frameworks – kind of like mini FDAs," says Hauser. They control everything from packaging guidelines to manufacturing standards to testing requirements. Alexi Chialtas, whose company WUNDER is licensed to make cannabis drinks under California's marijuana program, sees expansion of available cannabinoids as an opportunity to target moods, not skirt state law. "We ultimately decided to blend delta-8 THC and delta 9-THC, and then also CBD, because we appreciated the experience," he explains. "It is the closest to kind of this unwinding [feeling], more complex high, if you will."

The proliferation of delta-8 has opened the door to experimentation with more obscure cannabinoids, like delta-10 THC and hexahydrocannabinol, also known as HHC – which has scientists more concerned. "Delta-10 THC has never been studied in people," says Klumpers. "In fact, I couldn't even find any study of delta-10 THC in animals."

While HHC, which is made by hydrogenating delta-8 or delta-9 THC, has been studied in animals, it's still unclear if it could have any adverse reactions on humans. Mark Scialdone – an organic chemist who patented the process to make a form of HHC called HHCA – notes that there could be unforeseen consequences from ingesting a molecule that hasn't gone through human testing. He points to the discovery of hydrogenated vegetable shortening, which improved shelf stabilization of food products, but introduced a new wrinkle to the American diet. "What we now know is that hydrogenation of fats makes trans fats in the process," says Scialdone. "Could [chronic use of] hydrogenated cannabinoids over many, many years, lead to chronic health conditions? We just don't know yet."

THC

GRIFFIN LOTZ



BE REAL

The latest hot, new social media app is selling a dream of authenticity online — it's certainly interesting to look at

BY EJ DICKSON

HOT VOYEURISM APP

TO PARAPHRASE Cher Horowitz, searching for authenticity on a social media app is like trying to find meaning in a Pauly Shore film. Yet that hasn't stopped Silicon Valley from trying. Apps like VSCO, Cluster, We Heart It, and Dispo all aim to take the pressure off curating one's flawlessly Valencia-hued Instagram grid in favor of a grittier and more real social media experience, as if there were such a thing.

Social media is an inherently inauthentic experience, one that relies on playacting various expertly curated personae to a select audience of followers. Whether you're posting latte art from your NOLA vacation or trying to craft the perfect Jordan Peterson quote tweet dunk for clout, there is a tacit understanding that you're not behaving anything like your real self, because that version of you is far more boring than the one you put out online.

One app, however, is willing to bet that your real, authentic self – zits, raccoon eyes, flyaways and all – is a lot more interesting than you think. BeReal, a French photo-sharing app with a mind-numbing valuation of $600 million, is a combination of Instagram stories and Snapchat, joining the ephemerality of the latter (you can only post once a day, which disappears after 24 hours) with the mundaneness of the former. Because the app sends you notifications reminding you to post every day – and because you can't see your friends' posts without posting yourself – you're basically required to post what you're doing, regardless of whether it's interesting or not, which means your feed tends to be full of a lot of poorly composed photos of laptop screens and swivel desks. To add insult to injury, the app also requires that you post a selfie with every photo, and there are no filters or editing software you can add to make that bleary-eyed TweetDeck stare look any better. The app's rather ominous mission? To help you "discover who your friends really are in their daily life," according to its website. (BeReal declined my interview request, directing me instead to a press packet, which I suppose is their right for $600 million.)

Given these myriad limitations on what you can post, one would think BeReal would be a massive flop, a venture relegated to the margins of tech start-up history like Yo or Cuddlr or Whisper or Lulu. Yet it has flourished among an audience of zillennials exhausted by the hyper-FaceTuned aesthetics of their Instagram feeds. "There's a spontaneity about it which takes the edge off," says Joey Gingold, 28, a product manager at a parametric insurance firm. His first photo wasn't particularly exciting – it was of a sidewalk he happened to be walking down when he received a notification reminding him to post – but then again, that's kind of the point: As he puts it, BeReal provides a glimpse into the actual realities of its users, however mundane they may be, serving as a reminder to stop and appreciate the little things. "I have always thought that taking pictures is kind of a [reminder] to be 'in the moment,' even if it's silly," he says. "The notification BeReal sends is kind of a trigger to drop what you are doing and recognize the moment in a way."

The fact sheet the company provided to me when I reached out for this story includes the following rather dramatic pronouncement: "Warning! BeReal will challenge your creativity. BeReal is life, real life, and this life is without filters."

Since downloading the app a few weeks ago, I have not achieved similar moments of Zen clarity; mostly, using the app has served as a reminder to me of how truly boring my everyday existence is. (Most of my photos are variations of me lying down in bed typing on my computer, my chin in the selfie shot angled at various unflattering positions.) What it did do, however, was serve as a reminder to me that other people's lives are just as dull and non-photogenic as my own.

Because I am somewhat outside what I assume is BeReal's target demo of terminally jaded, wide-leg-pants-wearing zoomers, I only have about six or seven friends on the app, but all of them were posting pretty much the same type of content I was: goofy, unposed midwork selfies; day trips to museum exhibits; and the occasional road-trip vista shot or two. It turned out to be a starker departure from my friends' typical, hypercurated Instagram Stories than I had expected: a true authentic moment in time, however fleeting it may be, no snarky caption or sleek filter required. And it did feel voyeuristic in a way to peek into the lives of people I don't even know particularly well: Even if they weren't showing me anything they thought was interesting, I certainly thought otherwise.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **LARS LEETARU**

ONE MAN - A SINGER, SONGWRITER, AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST - made a difference in 1980, but never saw what he had fully accomplished.

Harry Chapin saw hunger as "The shame of America" and did something about it when he founded Long Island Cares.

Many of his fellow artists have joined the fight against hunger on Long Island to honor Harry's legacy.

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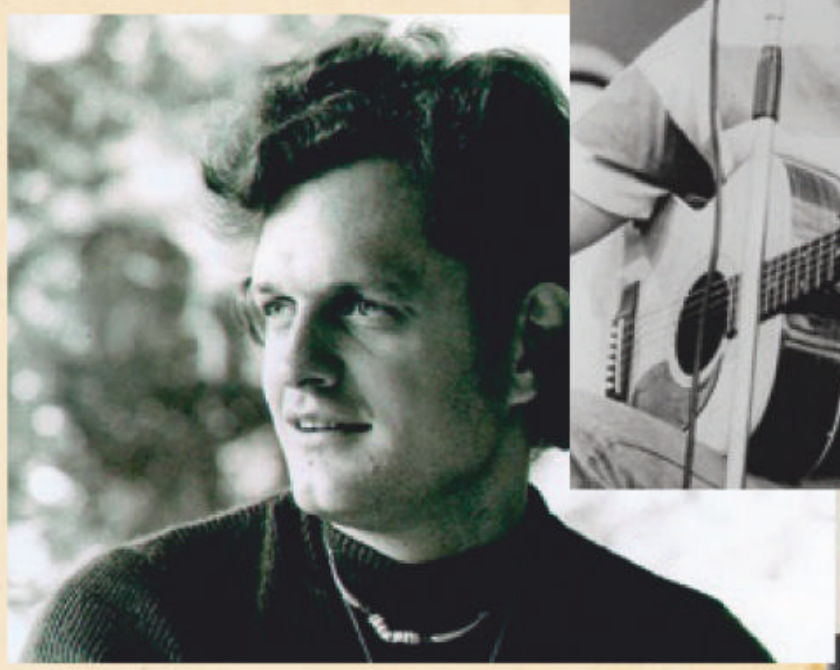

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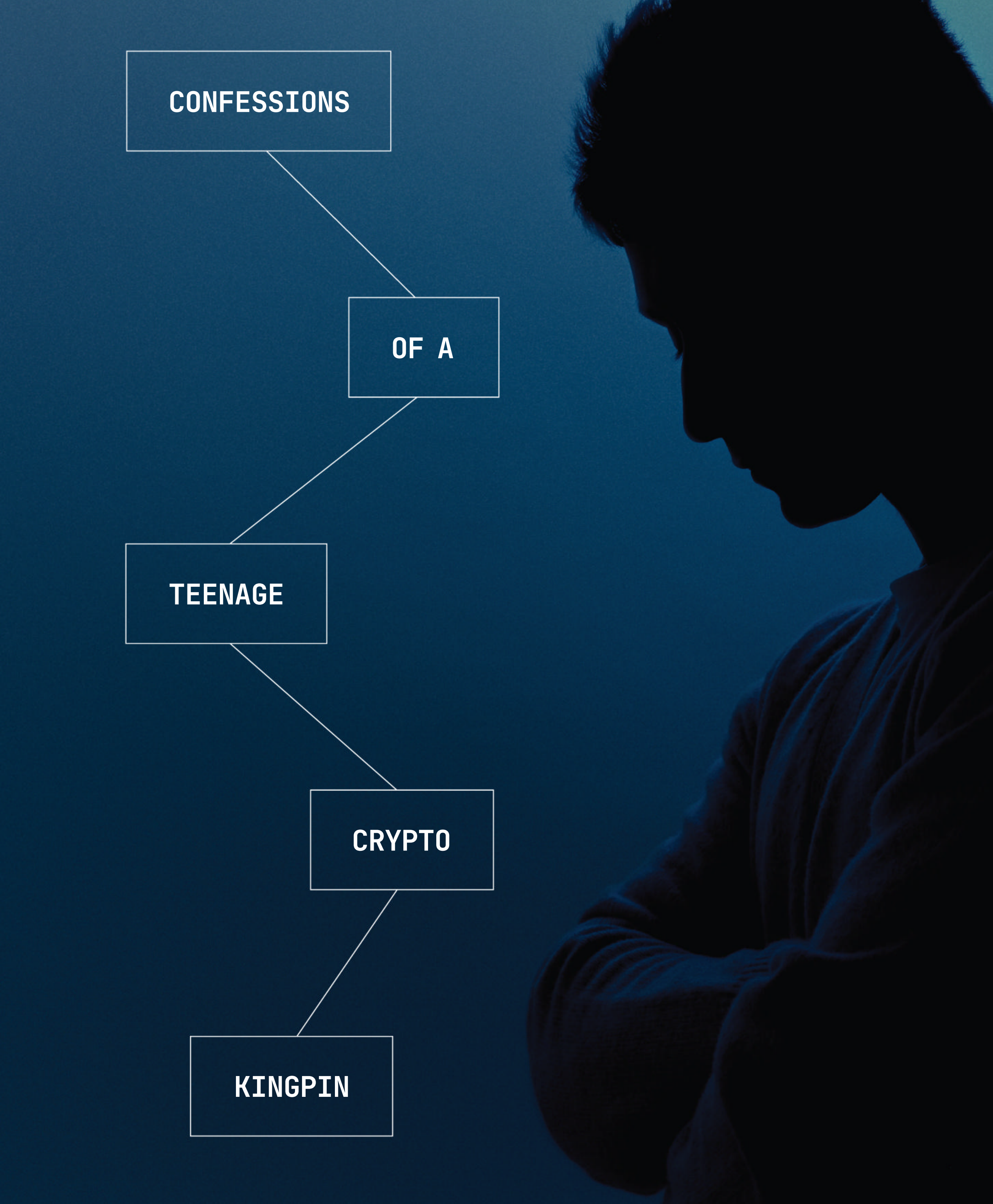

CONFESSIONS
OF A
TEENAGE
CRYPTO
KINGPIN

How ‘Baby Al Capone’ pulled off a $23.8 million crypto heist and has been paying the price ever since

—

BY ALEX MORRIS

Photographs by Evelyn Freja

THE BREAK-IN

HAPPENED

around 4 a.m., on a leafy street in the otherwise sleepy and sleeping village of Irvington, New York. Four men wearing ski masks and gloves, armed with knives, rope, brass knuckles, and a fake 9 mm, crept around the back of the large suburban home, their ghostly forms captured by its security-camera footage. As would later be alleged in court proceedings, the rope was intended to tie up the family. The knife was to torture them until the oldest son told them what they wanted to know. The gun was for show: A fake gun can evoke the same amount of fear as a real one but leads to lesser charges. These men knew what they were doing. And they apparently knew exactly what they wanted to find.

A bedroom community 20 miles up the Hudson River from New York City, Irvington's whole point is to be a place of calm, not calamity, a place where white-collar families can disperse themselves sparsely in well-appointed homes with river vistas and two-car garages. There are good public schools. There is a historic Main Street that runs up from the water, a parade of American flags suspended from buildings that look as though they were plucked from a Christmas village. The town is named for former resident Washington Irving, whose Rip Van Winkle is cast in bronze, forever waking from his long slumber in the yard beside Town Hall, oblivious to the soccer moms in Lululemon and the teenagers in Ivy League sweatshirts who saunter by throughout the day. Beyond Main Street, tended lawns extend up into the hills, deliberately at a peaceful remove from the crime and grime of urban life.

And yet, Ellis Pinsky had feared that something dangerous and violent was headed toward Irvington. He'd feared it for weeks now. He'd sat in his 12th-grade math class and pondered the various means by which calamity might befall him, how it would arrive, what form it would take, what he might do to defend himself. His answer to that last concern was a shotgun, which he had stored in a drawer by his bed, near the chess trophies he'd won when he was younger, when the games he played stuck to their borders. At Blueline Shooting Sports a couple of towns over, his slender, studious form had drawn looks from the rougher types who spent their afternoons aiming assault weapons at targets next to a store full of tactical supplies. He ignored the stares, drawn the shotgun up to his smooth, handsome face under its shock of black hair, trained his brown eyes on a point in the distance, and pulled the trigger.

He'd been right to prepare. On May 23, 2020, a broken window set off the alarm that woke Pinsky's family. An unknown man dropped down into their unfinished basement, his own gaze trained in the direction of a safe that had been installed by a previous owner.

In the floors above, Pinsky loaded the shotgun and met his mother in the hallway outside his bedroom. She directed him to the adjacent room where his three younger brothers were gathered, terrified and tearful. Pinsky hustled them behind something – a chair, a mattress; he can't remember now – closed the door and backed away from it, the shotgun raised to his shoulder, his finger on the trigger, his eyes on the doorknob. Then he waited. From somewhere downstairs, there was yelling. One of his brothers whimpered. The gun metal grew warm in Pinsky's hands.

He knew – or, at least, was pretty sure he knew – why the men were there, breaking into his family home at 4 a.m. Two years earlier, on Jan. 7, 2018, when he was 15 years old, Pinsky had pulled off a heist of $23.8 million, one of the largest cryptocurrency hacks of its kind ever executed. Two weeks before the break-in, a lawsuit had been filed against him, and news stories had circulated connecting him to the hack. He knew that the thieves wanted this money, the millions and millions of dollars he had stolen. He also knew that he couldn't give it to them. He didn't have it. Not anymore. The only thing in the basement safe at that particular moment was a pair of his mother's Uggs.

Senior writer Alex Morris *wrote the Jennifer Lopez cover story for the February issue.*

IN THE TWO years since Pinsky's case became public, he has remained an enigma. He did not speak to the media, who portrayed him as a mini mastermind, a suburban teenage sociopath. When I finally meet up with him on a chilly day this spring, he is no longer a kid. He is an anxious young man in Invisalign braces. "I just feel it's important for my side of the story to be heard," he says after hugging me in greeting. "There should always be two sides."

Over the course of the next few months, we meet periodically at a series of coffee shops and cafes not far from his university dorm. Often, we forgo the establishments' bustling interiors and sit bundled up outside, in the privacy of empty tables and preoccupied passersby. Pinsky doesn't want me to know exactly where he lives and is clearly nervous about the repercussions of speaking to the press. His voice and affect are mellow, but there is a spring-loaded nature to his physicality, a nervous energy that hums below the suave surface. When he concentrates on how to answer a question I've asked, he blinks quickly. He takes long pauses. He favors black corduroy pants and a black sweater, and mentions several tattoos he is considering getting. He is affable, though sometimes I can sense him emotionally retreating. He shows up with notes of what he wants to say typed out on his phone. His approach is methodical. He wants to start at the beginning. "Everything's important," he says of the details of his story.

As he explains it, moving to the suburbs in fifth grade had seemed like a win to 11-year-old Pinsky. Gone was the cramped apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where his younger brothers slept in cribs in the living room and his overworked mother left him in the care of her aging parents, emigrés from the former Soviet Union, who carted him to meetings with a punishing

"It really clicked at 12," Pinsky says. "'I'm this little kid, but I can wield this power.'"

chess coach and plied him with food that made him pudgy. In Irvington, his mother called him to breakfast from an entirely different floor of the house, as if he were some kid in a sitcom. In Irvington, he found himself possessed of the digs any tween would dream of: his own room painted blue, his own TV, and his own Xbox One, to which he applied his obsessive personality to the mastery of both *Call of Duty: Ghosts* and to the social posturing of the online lobbies of Xbox Live. He learned the art of trash-talking. And, as with anything he set his mind to, he learned it well.

Still, it all seemed like a game because that's all it was. Then one day, in the midst of spouting verbal abuse into a flimsy headset, a simple question in one of his trash-talking chats stopped him in his tracks: "How's the weather in Irvington?" The weather in Irvington was fine. What wasn't fine is that someone, somewhere – a person who up until that moment had been merely an avatar, a disembodied voice floating on electrical currents – well, that person knew where he lived. And was breezily threatening him with that information.

He immediately logged off. But he almost as immediately realized that this was the next level of the game. This was leveling up. Asking around to other gamers, he soon learned that a free program called Wireshark could be installed that "sniffed out" incoming network connections and identified their internet protocol addresses. A quick Google search of an IP address would tell you approximately where it was coming from. It seemed a revelation to Pinsky. "That's when it really clicked at the age of 12 or 13: 'Wow, I'm this little kid, but I can really wield this power,'" he says. The internet held such secrets. All he had to do was uncover them.

As he soon found, there were plenty of people working to uncover them all the time, and willing to share their methods – for a price. The most highly regarded of them, at least among the more sketchy gamers with whom Pinsky started associating, went by the username Ferno. Pinsky DM'd him on Twitter, saying he wanted to learn his skills. Ferno responded, if tersely, as Pinsky recalls. He would tolerate Pinsky, teach him, mentor him on how to uncover the powerful secrets the internet held, if Pinsky would then use the methods he'd learned to track down information for Ferno. He didn't explain to Pinsky what he was doing with these addresses, these Social Security numbers, these other details – nor did Pinsky ask. It didn't matter. It was just part of the game, one with tokens and everything. "His avatar was a little gold coin," Pinsky explains. "Which I came to be familiar with as bitcoin."

Pinsky had learned on his own how to do distributed denial of service, or DDoS, attacks, flooding servers with such a volume of requests that it overwhelmed the system and shut them down. In their rudimentary forms, DDoS attacks can be a kind of mischief helpful to a gamer who might want to boot another player from the game. But Ferno also introduced him to ISP doxxing, a method that involved calling up an internet service provider, pretending to be a member of the tech-support team, and using someone's IP address to try to get a real employee to share the confidential information attached to it – a form of interpersonal "hacking" known as social engineering. "It's basically manipulating someone to give you information or do a certain thing," Pinsky says. "At the age of 13, this was really my first experience with that."

Even as he was helping Ferno track down other people's identities, Pinsky, who went by the username Pie, knew little of Ferno's. Pinsky guessed the more senior hacker to be about 18. He says he suspected that Ferno had ties to Lizard Squad, a group of hackers who had gained notoriety by using DDoS to take down Xbox Live's servers one Christmas. Though the event had made headlines, Pinsky soon realized that most of Ferno's connections were little more than "script kiddies," would-be hackers who simply used programs created by others to carry out their hacks. Nothing they were doing was technically that difficult; it just took a questionable moral compass and a desire to wreak havoc. Pinsky lost interest. By the time he was 13, he again wanted to level up.

If Ferno had revealed little of himself, what he had revealed was the fringes of a secret cyber world of mischief and mayhem, one with, if not allegiances, at least collaborations and a certain type of criminal hierarchy inherent in the common knowledge of who could pull off what. OGUsers, a forum around which such hackers coalesced, offered an array of new methods to glean confidential information, which was then often used to hack accounts and steal cool usernames – the shorter and simpler the name, the more prestige it conferred. The forum seemed to have a few hundred users, overwhelmingly young and male as far as Pinsky could tell, and sometimes fairly flush. Desirable Twitter or Instagram usernames – or ones belonging to celebrities or influencers – could be sold for hundreds to even thousands of dollars. Pinsky got to where he could sometimes gain control of one in minutes.

Soon, he says, he was making his way up the ranks of the OGUser community, finding that his skills would quickly surpass those of whatever mentor he took on. "I've always been an autodidact, always been very persistent," he tells me. He was adept at social engineering – personable and clever, with a voice like he knew his way around Cupertino – but he also had an ease with the more technical side of hacking. Realizing that a lot of the information social engineers used came from hacked databases, he began teaching himself to program, particularly to do the Structured Query Language injections and cross-site scripting that allowed him to attack companies' database architecture. The terabyte upon terabyte of databases he extracted, traded, and hoarded made him valuable to OGUsers as well as to others, like the Russian hackers he was able to converse with thanks to his fluency with his mother's native language. Sometimes he'd see their names in headlines, connected to successful hacks of companies like LinkedIn. By the time he was 14, he tells me, "I think it's fair to say I had the capabilities to hack anyone."

Still, he maintains that the practical implications of the game he was playing seemed far removed, even if he sometimes had awareness of the strangeness of the double life he was leading, attending high school by day and extracting the source code of major corporations by night. Online, he says, "I think I had a reputation of someone who had these digital skills that they could wield, someone who was knowledgeable and powerful. At that point, I was toward the top of the food chain, and the people who were up there with me were people who really did this professionally, as opposed to a game."

> "I was toward the top of the food chain," Pinksy says. "And the people who were up there with me were people who really did this professionally, as opposed to a game. By the time I was 14, it's fair to say I had the ability to hack anyone."

Yet as far as anyone in Irvington could tell, Pinsky was simply a well-liked, well-rounded kid who was "so smart it was stupid," as one of his classmates put it. Perhaps he did have a quality of being a little set apart, a little more worldly than his Irvington peers. One of his friends tells me that if she'd had to guess which of her classmates had a secret life, she would have guessed it was him. Yet no one did guess. His friends on his soccer team knew he was skilled with computers – if someone happened to forget a password to an account, he could always help them recover it – but, he says, he confided in no one IRL. He was 14 years old and taken with the thrill of possessing a hidden superpower, of spending his nights secretly tapping into an underground world where he was esteemed and even feared. And then, in the morning, being called downstairs to breakfast.

BY 2016, when President Obama wrote an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* talking up the importance of two-factor authentication for cybersecurity, hackers were hard at work trying to fig-

ure out how to get around it. This is how Pinsky first heard of a new and intriguing method called "SIM swapping" or a "port-out scam." It involved persuading employees at wireless carriers to remotely switch a SIM card from a target's phone to one controlled by the hacker so that when the two-factor-authentication text came through, it would be the hacker who received it. Controlling someone's phone gave Pinsky control of their entire digital identity – at least for a time – a prospect so enticing that he began to seek a more efficient way to go about it than tricking guileless employees at Verizon or AT&T. He wrote a Python script to comb through social media networks and seek out any mentions of working for a carrier. Then he'd reach out with an offer of compensation for helping him with a task. Every fifth or sixth person – underpaid and often working a short-term contract – would say they were game, as Pinsky tells it. For a couple hundred dollars' worth of bitcoin, they'd be willing to do a SIM swap, no questions asked. Eventually, Pinsky says, he had employees at every major carrier also working for him.

Then the stakes got even higher. It was only a matter of time before OG hackers, known to each other as "the Community," realized that if they could use the SIM-swapping method to steal usernames, they could just as easily use it to steal cryptocurrency. Suddenly, nerdy kids who had never worked a real job and who had grown up in a virtual world full of virtual tokens and virtual friends, were using a rip in the fabric of the internet to access the type of wealth most people could only dream of having at an age when their frontal lobes hadn't even fully developed. With one hack and one good target, they could potentially make not thousands, but millions.

In early 2018, someone with the username Harry reached out to Pinsky and asked if he could hack an AT&T phone, which, of course, he could. According to Pinsky's account, Harry said he had a target he thought was good. Michael Terpin, then 60, was a heavyweight in the crypto world. An early tech enthusiast, he'd helmed a PR firm that repped America Online and launched the Motley Fool, Match.com, and Earthlink. He'd then started the first internet-based press-release distribution company, sold it for $35 million, and co-founded BitAngels, the first angel-investment group for startup cryptocurrencies. Working in PR for new coins, he'd ask to be paid in the coin itself: The more he could convince people that a coin was about to take off, the more likely it was to actually do so – and the more his own coins would be worth. He was very good at his job.

Or so it seemed to Harry. Pinsky says Harry gave him a phone number and an email address, and they decided they'd try to pull off the hack the next day.

On the evening of Jan. 7, Pinsky sat at his desk – a folding table from Costco lined with $20 LED lights – and started the process. Over Telegram, he contacted his employee at AT&T and had him port Terpin's SIM to the phone of an online acquaintance he'd recruited for the task, hoping to leave no physical trace that would connect the hack back to him. Then, he says, he and Harry – joining in from Skype – reset Terpin's email and made a new password. Pinsky ran a script to search the emails for certain keywords that might contain electronic keys to crypto wallets, software programs where crypto coins are stored.

▲ Hacker Nick Truglia was convicted in connection to the SIM-card hacks.

There was evidence that Terpin had crypto – subscription emails and the like – but nothing that would get them in. Harry was about to give up when Pinsky started searching for email accounts with other providers and resetting the passwords to those. Finally, an Outlook account turned up the type of file they'd been hoping to find. "It was called 'Passwords' or 'Keys,'" Pinsky recalls. "At that point, it was like, 'Holy shit.' We open that file, and see that there's just a bunch of keys to various wallets."

At this point, they were racing against the clock: It wouldn't take Terpin long to realize that his phone had gone dead, that he couldn't access his email, and that he needed to lock accounts down. Pinsky was able to see the balance for a wallet holding the cryptocurrency Ethereum – "The balance we saw was around $900 million; we were like, 'Holy crap. That's crazy' – but the interface required an additional password, which he couldn't find. Adrenaline racing, they tried a wallet from a company called Counterparty and were able to unlock it with a 12-word seed phrase – a series of words that serves as a kind of password on steroids. Inside were roughly 3 million coins of a currency called Triggers, which Pinsky had never heard of. His first instinct was that it was probably close to worthless, valued at a penny, if that; but he went to CoinMarketCap, the Nasdaq of cryptocurrencies, just to be sure. He'd been wrong: On that day, Triggers was worth more than $7 a coin. Pinsky quickly did the math in his head and then did it again to be sure – he was still in algebra, after all. The math checked out. The account, the very one he now controlled, was worth close to $24 million. He'd won the game. And he hadn't yet turned 16.

THERE HAVE BEEN perfect hacks, ones where the hackers made not a single error. Pinsky's wasn't one of them.

Part of that has to do with the enormous sum – it is known to be the largest SIM-swapping hack pulled off by an individual (as opposed to, say, a government like North Korea, which has also gotten in on the crypto-heist game). The sheer volume of crypto – and the limits crypto exchanges put on daily transactions – meant it would take more people to launder the coins. And more people meant more loose ends, more chances that someone would talk.

Quickly, Pinsky needed to get the Triggers converted to bitcoin on a cryptocurrency exchange like Binance, which allowed for such conversions. He created a Twitter post asking if anyone had a Binance account, or knew someone who did. Once he'd rounded up as many people as he could – six or seven, as he recalls – he began directing the Triggers coins into their accounts, having them exchange them for bitcoin, and then divert the bitcoin (minus $20,000 to $50,000 as payment for their "services") into an account Pinsky and Harry controlled. But first – and against his better judgment – Pinsky sent a small amount from Terpin's account to his own, just to make sure it was real. It was. That also left a footprint.

Throughout this process, Pinsky says, millions of dollars worth of cryptocurrency were lost. Terpin's 3 million Triggers represented about 10 percent of the Triggers market; as Pinsky's money launderers were converting it, the market was crashing in real time. There were also fees associated with such large transactions. And – no honor among thieves – not all the bitcoin that was meant to make its way into Pinsky and Harry's account actually did so. Notably, after sending a half-million-dollar test to a guy with the username @erupts, Pinsky sent him another million to launder. Instead, Pinsky claims, @erupts kept the million for himself. Pinsky also claims that Harry was so pissed off at the theft of stolen cryp-

NICK TRUGLIA/TWITTER

to he floated the idea of putting a hit on @erupts. "He wanted to get some, in his word, 'thugs' to take care of it or something like that," Pinsky explains, though he says that idea was quickly nixed. In real life? "That's just crossing the line."

Eventually, Pinsky and Harry split the spoils, with Pinsky taking a larger share, as he'd done most of the technical work, as he tells it. When all was said and done, Pinsky says, he ended up with 562 bitcoins, worth close to $10 million at the time. At some point in the night, he finally went to sleep. He had school the next morning.

After that, Pinsky says, his life didn't change much. At least not at first. For a while, he half-expected the FBI to knock on his door at any moment, just like in the movies; but as time passed, he grew less anxious. He spent $50,000 worth of bitcoin on a Patek Philippe watch and took out about $100,000 in cash, which he kept under his bed in a $40 safe he'd ordered on Amazon. On a trip back from Chicago with his mom, he paid $870 for them to take an empty leg flight on a private jet. But mostly, Pinsky says, he didn't think too much about his riches. "It made me a little more bored in my history class," he recalls. "That's about it." He'd wanted to win the game, and now he had. "I felt like I sort of went to the highest level," he tells me. "After this Terpin event, obviously, the money was there, but also I had this feeling that I was sort of done with that life. It wasn't attractive to me. That was it."

He says he moved on to learning different types of programming. He ran a sneaker business that used bots and scripts to snap up limited pairs then flip them: "Like Yeezy's and all that. It's a legit thing." He went to soccer practice. He and his friends had started hanging out with girls on the weekend, driving down to the docks where you could see the glowing lights from the Tappan Zee Bridge. Pinsky was socially awkward in large groups, but one-on-one he was good at cultivating intimacy, which had secured him a spot in a more popular group at school. After he turned 16, his parents let him drive around Irvington in their Audi, passing himself off as an average, lucky teen rather than a crypto millionaire whose ruthlessness online was so extreme that one kid placed a report with his local police alleging that Pinsky "made threats about having me and my mom killed." In trying to launder Terpin's crypto, the kid apparently had sent some of it to the wrong account.

Then one day he got a message from @erupts, the hacker who he alleged had disappeared with that $1 million from the Terpin hack. As it turned out, @erupts' real name was Nick Truglia, he was 20 or 21 years old, and he lived in Manhattan. He wanted to meet Pinsky, to take him for a night out in the city. From what Pinsky could tell, Truglia seemed to view him as a legendary figure, a kid who could pull off anything – and Pinsky figured Truglia probably wanted in on whatever he might cook up next. As for the missing million, it's not like Pinsky could really point fingers, anyway. Truglia was persistent, and though Pinsky was suspicious, he agreed to meet up.

In his account of how that Friday night went down, Pinsky and a high school friend he'd recruited for the trip disembarked from a Metro North train to find Truglia waiting for them in Grand Central Station, wearing a baseball cap, a sparkling Audemars Piguet watch, and a wide grin. He told them he was going to show them a good time, then whisked them from an Uber to his apartment in a high-rise luxury building called Sky on West 42nd Street. Inside, Pinsky claims, there were sleek lines and stacks of cash, which Pinsky gauged to be tens of thousands of dollars, and which seemed to be left there conspicuously. Pinsky wasn't impressed with the money, but Truglia had plenty of other enticements on offer, starting with the two models who showed up at his place shortly after the high school kids arrived, followed by dinner at some fancy Italian restaurant and a brief hang at the swanky SoHo pad of a real estate billionaire's son. Before long, Pinsky and his friend were being surrounded by models outside of a club called Up&Down, where Rich the Kid was performing and where they were shuffled inside among the distracting camouflage of clavicles and cheekbones. By the time Truglia threw down a platinum Amex and bottles of $2,000 tequila started materializing, Pinsky could tell from the look on his friend's face that this moment was meant to be epic, that they would forever be legends at Irvington High School for managing to pull off this one night. They sent a Snapchat to their friends from the VIP area to make sure the moment was documented. "Everyone was like, 'How'd you get in? It's crazy!' " he says.

Still, as far as Pinsky was concerned, it wasn't all as great as it appeared on social media. It was weird hanging out with people who were actual adults and who he didn't really know, and to the extent he did know Truglia, it wasn't for a great reason. It made him nervous that people in Truglia's orbit seemed familiar with who he was. At 6 a.m., Pinsky and his friend took an Uber home, each telling their parents that their sleepover at the other's house had ended early. In pictures from that night, he says, "if you look closely, you can see I'm not having the best time. It's a little awkward."

Pinsky was right to be unsettled by Truglia (who, through his lawyers, declined to comment). On Nov. 14, 2018, members of the Regional Enforcement Allied Computer Team (REACT) high-tech task force arrested Truglia at his Manhattan apartment after a $1 million SIM-swapping heist he'd helped conduct a few weeks earlier. While searching his iCloud backup file, investigators found evidence that he'd also been involved in stealing Michael Terpin's $23.8 million, including messages sent the day of the heist telling friends that "today my life changed forever" and "I'm a millionaire. I'm not kidding. I have 100 bitcoin." Beforehand, he'd been texting his dad to ask for money; now he was offering to hire "porn star escorts" and take his friends to the Super Bowl. Acquaintances online and otherwise knew about his dealings with Pinsky. It wasn't long before people started talking. Some of what they said was even true.

"We were all doing this sociopathic crap. I would not hang out with a 15-year-old Ellis," Pinsky tells me. "I would run away from him. I feel ashamed. I deeply want to distance myself from all of this stuff. It is so ugly."

OVER THE YEARS, Pinsky tells me, strange things had happened that he assumed were connected to his activity online, hints he should have picked up on that the so-called game could potentially bleed into real life. Once, someone had called and said there was a car bomb in his house. Another time, a stranger showed up at the front door asking for Pinsky, though he wasn't home. He told his mom and stepfather that these were gamer pranks, and he says that they seemed to believe him. They also knew he dabbled in cryptocurrency. In August 2019, nine months after the Terpin heist, Pinsky says his father randomly emailed him an article about how Terpin was suing AT&T for $224 million for gross negligence in his SIM-swapping case. Pinsky replied, "Why are you sending this to me?"

Law-enforcement officials confirm that the parents of SIM swappers are often clueless, easily convinced that their children's newfound wealth is from early investments in bitcoin – or not even aware that the wealth exists at all. "The reality is, there are [lots of] parents who don't know that their teenagers are technically many times wealthier than they are on paper," says Brian Krebs, a cybersecurity analyst and author of *Spam Nation*. "Certainly, if they start driving Fer-

raris, then you've got to ask some hard questions" – one SIM swapper did use crypto to buy a McLaren – "but in a lot of cases," he says, "the parents are just kind of oblivious."

Pinsky maintains that his parents definitely were. On New Year's Eve 2018, his mom received an email from Terpin's lawyer, famed trial attorney Pierce O'Donnell (once referred to as "the new Perry Mason in Hollywood") that spelled out many of the details of the heist and argued that her son was the mastermind. Panicked, she forwarded Pinsky the email and said, "We need to talk," which they did later that night around the kitchen table. "I was terrified," Pinsky says. "This was the first time, at 16 years old, I sort of realized this video game that I've been living in for several years just got real. And I need to address this." He recalls that he gave his mom just enough information for her to quickly realize that he'd need a lawyer, and in early January, they took the train down to 500 5th Avenue to the law offices of Lankler Siffert & Wohl, where they met in a conference room with Siffert himself. It was the first of many trips Pinsky would take to the office that year, the first of many times he'd be asked to go through the details of the past few years of his life.

And it was the beginning of what can properly be described as a legal shitshow, on par with – and in fact directly related to – the extreme volatility of crypto. Pinsky and his legal team preempted his arrest by contacting the U.S. attorney directly and offering his cooperation. In

▲ **Crypto impresario Michael Terpin wants Pinsky charged under RICO.**

February 2020, he voluntarily returned every last thing he says he got from the Terpin heist: 562 bitcoins, the Patek watch, and the cash he'd stored in the safe under his bed. He knew it would be an admission of guilt, but says he was fine with that – he was guilty, after all – and he hoped returning everything would be viewed as an act of good faith. Terpin viewed it far less generously. He'd lost a fortune, much of which had ended up in Pinsky's possession. On the night of Jan. 7, 2018, 562 bitcoins had been worth about $10 million; on the day they were returned, they were worth less than $2 million. Multiple rounds of settlement negotiations confirmed that Terpin wanted more.

Actually, he wanted much more. He wanted $71.4 million, and he believed he was entitled to it under the RICO Act, which allows for treble damages in cases of organized crime. Terpin has long argued that that is what cyber gangs are. "You know, in a bank robbery, you got a guy with a gun, a guy who cases the joint, a guy in the getaway car," he says. "Everybody's got a job. Same thing in a SIM-swap gang. Once they get control of your cell, they go in and have a gang of programmers." He also doesn't understand why Pinsky has never been criminally charged. "I've been told that it's because he was a minor. They have a hard time figuring out what to do with minors," he says. "But these kids basically learn this thing from other kids and they get away with it until the age of 18, and then they stop and are pretty much rewarded for life. I mean, had [Pinsky] stopped one before me, nobody would have ever known."

Terpin tells me this over Zoom one day this spring, wearing chunky glasses and a sleeveless T-shirt, and sitting in front of what appears to be a harbor, a virtual background that he says was an image of his real background ("It's actually even sunnier today"). He says that he was the first of the big crypto guys to make the move to Puerto Rico, taking advantage of the island's tax exemption for tech, which he discusses at length. He also talks about his days as an early adopter of cryptocurrency, back when bitcoin went for $120 a coin and he was kicking himself for not getting it at $4. "I'm a non-geek, but I understand tech, and I've tried to just basically go and find industries that interested me personally and that I thought were growing at a faster speed than the economy," he says. When it came to blockchain technology, "I was like, 'This is the next internet.' I totally got it right away." He does not refer to the currency that Pinsky had stolen as Triggers, but rather as an "altcoin," and this is possibly intentional: He has been listed as a partner at Triggers, which has since crashed and been delisted from the crypto exchanges. Its value went up roughly 800 percent the month before Pinsky stole it, and Terpin tells me he'd [*Cont. on 133*]

XAVIER GARCIA/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES

How Noah Cyrus Saved Herself

Photographs by Jessica Lehrman

By Julyssa Lopez

Growing up in public hasn't been easy, but she's gotten through the painful years

Noah Cyrus

Far West Farms,

A BUCOLIC, family-run riding center perched off a chalky street in Calabasas, California, takes some effort to find. If you're in a car, you wind your way down Ventura Boulevard and around anonymous office buildings, past the flower-strewn pet cemetery where Humphrey Bogart buried his cocker spaniel Droopy, through groves of bursting palms and spiky hedge plants. The reward, once you've made it, is a rush of silence. From the entrance of the farm, the perpetual roar of the 101 and the anxiety of Los Angeles fade away, replaced with rustling trees and the occasional bray of a horse.

This has been Noah Cyrus' sanctuary since she was about 10 years old. She's been riding her entire life; one of her earliest baby photos shows her wearing a tiny red cowboy hat atop Roman, a towering, blue-eyed Appaloosa that her father, Billy Ray Cyrus, broke himself on his farm in Nashville – though not before Roman fractured one of the most famous noses in country music. "He bucked, drug my dad through the mud," Noah says. "That was the love of my dad's life."

When the Cyrus family moved to Los Angeles in the mid-2000s, Far West Farms owner Nick Karazissis – an amiable, award-winning rider now in his seventies – took Noah under his wing. "Tuesday through Sunday, every morning, I was here riding with him for about four hours a day, five hours a day. In the summer, it would be all day, every day," she says. Karazissis was calm and reassuring, a welcome force for the youngest kid in a sprawling showbiz family. "Obviously, I had a family that was split up a lot," she says. "Here I had something so permanent. . . . They would always make sure that when I came here I was Noah. I wasn't a Cyrus, I was just Noah."

More than a decade later, she still finds refuge here – and after a fraught couple of years, filled with aching losses and a substance-abuse problem she's only now opening up about,

Staff writer JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote the Rauw Alejandro cover story for the February issue.*

PREVIOUS PAGE: DRESS: **JEAN PAUL GAULTIER**; EARRINGS: **JACQUIE AICHE**

THIS PAGE: JUMPSUIT: **MARINE SERRE**; EARRINGS: **LOREE RODKIN**

DRESS: **IRIS VAN HERPEN**; EARRINGS: **STEFERE**

“I wake up in the mornings, and I’m able to look in a mirror and go on about my day without hating myself. I’m able to comfort myself and nurture myself.”

she’s chosen to come here one Thursday afternoon in April to meet me. I hear her before I see her: A black SUV pulls up behind me, and I can only make out wisps of guitars trickling out of the sound system, mixing in with the clomp of horseshoes from the barn. Later, I find out she was blasting a cover of “Sloop John B” that her dad recorded for his 2001 television series, *Doc*. Noah, who appeared on the show a few times as a cherubic toddler, has always loved the cover; she actually thought it was her dad’s song for a while. Billy Ray recently sent her a new version he’d been fiddling around with at home. “He gets bored, so he threw on his own drums a few weeks ago,” she tells me.

Noah arrives alone, dressed in a black hoodie and black sweatpants, her jet-black hair cascading past her waist. The curves of her face are instantly familiar; you can find traces of her parents or any one of her siblings in them if you look long enough. When she’s excited, her Tennessean drawl tends to get stronger, and it warms up her voice as she takes me around the stables. She’s carrying an apple in each hand for Fluffy, a Dutch warmblood belonging to Karazissis. She formed a special bond with Fluffy after Constantine, her longtime horse, whose name she has tattooed on her wrist, developed a baseball-size tumor in his stomach and had to be put down. Fluffy recognizes Noah instantly as she walks into his stall and strokes his muzzle.

“I always say feeling something in the palm of your hands is the closest you can really be to something,” she says, her hand moving down his neck. “It’s just feeling the way they’re breathing and the heartbeat and how you can connect to each other.” She shares an old saying that her late grandfather Ron Cyrus, who served in Kentucky’s House of Representatives for 11 consecutive terms, was fond of: “The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man.”

Lately, Noah has been focusing on what’s good for her, taking each day slowly. Since late 2020, she’s been in recovery from an addiction to Xanax, the benzodiazepine medication often prescribed for anxiety or panic attacks. After spiraling into a pitless pattern of drug abuse, she got help – six months before she started pouring everything into her debut LP, *The Hardest Part*. Though the music was soldered in pain, what stands out is Cyrus’ sense of grace and composure as she blends polished country pop and folk sounds, as woodsy and pristine as the inside of a walnut. The album is understated, even when it’s capturing the darkness that almost shattered her.

Three months into recovery, Cyrus met Mookie Singerman, a musician turned manager who used to front the Poughkeepsie, New York, metal band Genghis Tron, and who also manages indie wonder girl Caroline Polachek. After becoming Cyrus’ manager, he put her in a room with Mike Crossey, the Northern Irish producer with a credit list that includes the Arctic Monkeys, the 1975, and one of Cyrus’ favorite artists, Ben Howard. She and Crossey would wake up early in the morning and cross off tasks on a whiteboard – vocal takes, percussion arrangements, guitar additions – to build every song. Each day was a step closer to finishing the album, another day Cyrus stayed focused, grounded, and healthy.

“It gave me so much structure in the time that I really needed structure, because I didn’t want to just be sitting around and stirring in my brain,” she says. “It gave me hope.”

“WHEN I TURNED 20, I was overcome with the thought that I might not turn 21. Death upon my doorstep, if I took just one more step, there’d be nothing left of me except these songs…”

Those lines can knock a person sideways, and they’re how Cyrus chose to open her album. They come from “Noah (Stand Still),” a ballad that laces together gentle fingerpicking and Cyrus’ piano melodies, before building into an emotional crescendo. She’d shared an early demo with Crossey when she first met him in his Culver City studio. “I was blown away right out the gate with the songwriting,” he says. Her lyrics were intimate and fearless. “That was what struck me right away – the vulnerability and the honesty. She’s talking about very personal things in her life, and she’s done it in a way where they’re beautiful songs.”

Cyrus has tracked her battles with anxiety and depression in her music before. Her first EP, *Good Cry,* from 2018, was a mix of moody, minimal alt-R&B that was honest about the loneliness and heartbreak she was feeling at the time. She followed that up in 2020 with *The End of Everything,* an EP that was more experimental but just as searing, with songs such as “Lonely” and “July” touching on mental health and toxic relationships. The project got attention – an updated version of “July” with Leon Bridges cracked the Hot 100 – and later that year, she received a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist. Following the nomination, Cyrus teamed up with the Australian singer-songwriter PJ Harding for *People Don’t Change,* a set of six songs that deepened her catalog with themes of loss and spirituality.

Though Cyrus was always interested in music, she says what she wanted growing up was to “be a normal kid”: “I had a really hard time being a part of a public family, and I struggled a bit with that, because it wasn’t exactly my first choice.” Her high-profile family attracted even more fame when her older sister Miley Cyrus became one of Disney’s biggest stars on the show *Hannah Montana,* which ran for much of Noah’s childhood, from about age six to 11. “I had a hard time with people coming up to me and saying, ‘Are you Miley Cyrus’ little sister?’ or ‘Are you Hannah Montana’s little sister?’ I did not like that, and it stripped me of my own identity for a long time.” Sometimes, she says, if people asked, she’d just answer no. As she started going through puberty, she developed body dysmorphia, something that was only exacerbated by the pressures of public life. She battled depression, and a light she felt she carried as a kid got pushed down, deeper and deeper.

When she was 18, she tried downers for the first time. “My boyfriend at the time, when I was 18, was the first person that gave me a Xanax, and it became a way for us to bond,” she says. “I think I wanted to fit in with him. I wanted to be what he wanted and what he thought was cool and what I thought everybody was doing.” Party drugs like Molly had never been her thing. This was different. “Once I felt that it was possible to silence things out for a second and numb your pain, it was over,” she says.

Cyrus’ struggle with Xanax coincided with just how ubiquitous benzos and other prescription drugs have become in pop culture over the past several years, especially in music. Songs that list out contents of entire medicine cabinets have spiraled off into mini genres of smooth Xan-rap and lethargic pill-pop, striking a chord with a younger generation.

But the rise of benzos has also had deleterious effects in a country that is still in the grips of a deadly opioid epidemic. In 2020, 16 percent of overdose deaths involving opioids also involved benzodiazepines. While a Xanax prescription can

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCED BY BRITTANY BROOKS. STYLING BY BRETT NELSON FOR THE ONLY AGENCY. MARKET EDITOR: EMILY MERCER. HAIR BY LAURA RUGETTI FOR THE ONLY AGENCY. MAKEUP BY DAVID VASQUEZ. LOCATION: FAR WEST FARMS, CALABASAS, CALIFORNIA.

be safely used to treat anxiety and panic attacks, some artists have been open about their experiences misusing the drug: Chance the Rapper, Justin Bieber, and Lil Xan – someone Cyrus dated at one point, and whose entire artistic moniker is a reference to Xanax – are among those who have talked about recovering from abusing the sedative. Other tragedies have underscored the dangers of benzos: In 2017, the emo-rap heartthrob Lil Peep nodded off after taking a lethal combination of fentanyl and Xanax, and died at age 21.

To Cyrus, a big part of the problem was how accessible the drug was. "I was surrounded by people who were easily able to get it by buying it from people," she says. A few of her friends at the time bit back comments about her drug abuse and "kind of cosigned it," she says. What started recreationally morphed into a bleaker habit. "It just kind of becomes this dark pit, bottomless pit," she says. She'd sleep all day and wake up at 8 p.m. She didn't know which day was which, and her memory was slippery and unreliable. By the time the pandemic hit in 2020, her substance-abuse problem was at its worst.

ROYALTY Tish, Braison, Noah, Billy Ray, Brandi, and Miley Cyrus (from left) at the 2015 VMAs in Los Angeles

That entire year was chaotic. The lowest and most alarming moment came during an international television interview: Cyrus was doing press after releasing *The End of Everything* in May, and she started to pass out mid-conversation. "I was completely nodding off and falling asleep, and unable to keep my head up or keep my eyes open, because I was so far gone," she says. (The interview never aired.) The loss of her grandmother Loretta, in August of that same year, was a bitter wake-up call. Cyrus didn't really get a chance to say goodbye, and she wonders if she would have picked up the phone more often had she been more present. "I felt so guilty for not being there when my grandma died. I was there physically, but emotionally, I was not there. I couldn't be," she says. It also weighed on her that she'd shut herself off from her mother, Tish Cyrus, who was grieving. "That was my big eye-opener: I was sitting alone, and I was scared, and I realized that all the people that I love and all the people that I need, I was the one pushing them away," Noah says. More turmoil came that December, when she ignited a social media firestorm after she used the racially insensitive word "nappy" to describe the conservative pundit Candace Owens on Instagram. (She's deeply apologetic: "It's something that I'm just sorry for, that I could have possibly hurt people that I respect and a community that I respect and I love.")

Cyrus won't go into detail about the first few months of her recovery process; she only says that it was a delicate time. "I was being helped by everybody that I needed help from, and it took some time to get on my own two feet," she says. A game changer, she feels, was meeting Singerman and slowly wading into the creative process: "Mookie brought so much hope into my world, and so much care and compassion for me and my situation." Music became the best kind of catharsis for her, and while she had some trepidation about sharing what she was going through, she almost couldn't avoid it. "It was coming out in my lyrics," she says. "So, it's like, 'I'm not going to hide my truth.' I think it was evident that I was going through something the past couple years – I think my fans saw it. I think the public could see it." She wanted to take the reins and tell the story herself.

"Noah had a really strong sense of what she wanted," Crossey says. Her writing is rooted in the classic country and folk artists she loves, like Kris Kristofferson and Terry Jacks, and she guided the arrangements to sound timeless and minimal, yet unexpected. On the title song, "The Hardest Part," it was her idea to keep the percussion rhythm stripped back; on "I Burned LA Down," she wanted the drums just a little offbeat and out of the pocket.

Her friend PJ Harding has told her that he hears a lot of her in the music. "I think he means, 'Everywhere, there's pieces of you,' " she says. That intimacy comes through especially on "Loretta's Song." She wrote that one as a tribute to her grandmother, but also as a gift to her mother – a eulogy and gentle consolation that's helped her make amends with some of the losses in her life the past few years.

THERE'S A MEMORY from 2019 that appears twice on the album, on "Noah (Stand Still)" and "The Hardest Part." It was around Christmastime, and Cyrus went to visit her dad in Nashville. Her struggle with substance abuse had intensified, but she says most people still hadn't realized how bad things had become. That day with her dad, though, was haloed in joy. They spent the day riding four-wheelers and walking around the farm together. He pushed her on an old rope swing she used to play on as a kid, and they talked about different things – her childhood, her grandfather. But a sadness clung in the air. "Obviously, it was made public knowledge that my parents had been through some rough patches," she says. (Billy Ray and Tish filed for divorce in April this year – not for the first time.) "It felt like there were words that we both had to say but just couldn't say it."

The Hardest Part isn't just Cyrus processing her journey with addiction. It's also reconciling many of the relationships around her. One of the most pulverizing moments on the album is "Every Beginning Ends," with Ben Gibbard from Death Cab for Cutie, a band Cyrus fell in love with because of her older sister Brandi. She and Gibbard had been talking about the dissolution of past relationships – when one person stops putting the effort in, when the laughter fades. "I relate to that in many ways, not only with me, but also just with my parents' relationship," Cyrus says. "Writing about that gave me more understanding."

Gibbard says he didn't know what to expect from Cyrus, but he was floored once they met in Seattle and began putting the song together, line by line. "I kept coming back to it and just basking in her brilliance," Gibbard says, comparing her writing style to his friend Jenny Lewis'. "It's easy to be mysterious. It's easy to be aloof. It's easy to be cool. It's so much harder to be earnest, and it's so much harder because she's really opening herself up with a lot of these songs."

Celebrities who open up about addiction are often expected to become role models or figures of empowerment. Cyrus knows she doesn't have all the answers, and says that she just wanted to share her experience with her fans, in case it helps them get through their own hardships. "I'm not trying to be, like, any spokesperson for recovery or anything like that," she says. "I, myself, am just going through it and figuring it out."

These days, Cyrus' world is a little quieter, with hours dedicated to therapy and psychiatry and a lot of time at home with her dogs, Mellow and Marshall. "I wake up in the mornings, and I'm able to look in a mirror and go on about my day without hating myself," she says. "I'm able to comfort myself and nurture myself."

A text thread called Hotline Siblings helps her check in regularly with her brothers and sisters, and she goes to Nashville often to see her baby nephew, Bear. She's close to her mother, and her dad calls her constantly, blasting her album through his speakers and playing along on guitar.

Cyrus still has complicated feelings about her fame: "I don't look at it as, 'In 10 years, I have to be the world's biggest superstar.' "

Right now, she is feeling unbound. She has thought about doing a deluxe release of *The Hardest Part*, maybe with an a cappella version of "I Burned LA Down," or shaving down the pop-oriented ballad "Unfinished" to just an acoustic guitar.

She's even sent a few music videos in which she's riding horses to Karazissis at Far West Farms. "He's always commenting how proud he is of himself for teaching me such beautiful equitation," she says, laughing. Just like that ranch, her music has become one more place where she's found peace. ®

LARRY BUSACCA/GETTY IMAGES

LOOK: **ELENA VELEZ**;
SHOES: **PLEASER**;
EARRINGS: **LOREE RODKIN**

More than a thousand dogs are put down every day in America —

meet the elite team of dog trainers trying to change the system **BY PAUL SOLOTAROFF**

THE DOG RESCUERS

Cheddar was blind and sick when he was saved by the ASPCA.

THE DAY HER DOG went missing, Shanna Phillips lost her mind. Her first week at a bakery in Fairview, North Carolina, she dashed out, mid-shift, to scour the woods. In the three months since she'd found and adopted Sassy, that dog had salved her soul and heart after her mother died young of cancer. Effectively, Sassy had done what counseling alone couldn't: roll back Phillips' fear of dropping dead at 22. Now Sassy, who'd come through hell herself, was lost in a town she barely knew. Sobbing, Phillips phoned her friends and family, mustering a search party of eight. They combed the streets and side yards, postered Quick Marts and stop signs, and mounted large-font bulletins on Facebook for a small beagle mix with soulful eyes.

For two days, Phillips neither slept nor ate. At one point or another, there were 20 people chasing down porch-cam sightings of Sassy. Meanwhile, Phillips' boyfriend cut short a trip to beachfront Mississippi. "I was worried for Sass, but more so for Shanna – she loves that little dog like…" says Bryce Myers, a hydraulics engineer in his mid-twenties. "When you know what they've been through, you get why they're so bonded."

Sassy ran away on a Thursday morning. Friday night, Phillips was at the end of her tether when she heard a scrape at the door. She ran down to open it. There stood Sassy, giving a flick of her tail. "She walks in all chill, like, 'How's your day been?'" says Phillips. "I got down on the floor, sobbing – I could not stop hugging her." Sassy had gone all the way up a nearby mountain and somehow come back home without a scratch. It was one more wonder from a magic dog whose stock in trade seems to be cheating death.

Sassy's walk-off happened in the fall of 2020, when she was a year-and-a-half old. I met her in the fall of 2021, on the porch of the snug Craftsman that Phillips and Myers rent outside of Asheville. It was a brilliant afternoon in the Blue Ridge Foothills, and Sassy had the zoomies something fierce. *Whooossshhh!* went the small, brown blur going by, carving the corners of their quarter-acre lawn. *Skirrshhh!* went the leaf pile as she spin-cycled through the turns. She stopped for a belly rub and a stick of pepperoni, then charged off to scare the bejesus out of a rabbit. Here was a dog in Disneyland, so struck by joy you could plausibly call her stoned.

It didn't start this way when Phillips adopted Sassy in the summer of 2020. The dog barfed in her car and pooped in her apartment, all within their first hours together. For weeks, she wouldn't suffer her owner's affections, but Phillips was prepared to wait her out. She knew enough of Sassy's history to let time, space, and dog treats do their magic. "They told me she came from a crazy hoarder who had twenty-something dogs in a trailer," Phillips says. Actually, the count was 29 – and "crazy" doesn't begin to describe the owner.

A middle-aged woman in Yellville, Arkansas, with no ties to friends or relations, she was living with her dogs in a storage unit upholstered in piss and shit. The couch she slept on was soaked in urine; the floor was carpeted in turds. Exposure to the toxic particulates in pet waste had sickened, scarred, or killed the unit's canine occupants. Long-dead dogs lay chockablock with puppies struggling to breathe.

Severe mange and bug bites, feet bleached white by urine. Kyle Held, the ASPCA's investigator in the case, has walked hundreds of such scenes in his day. "You don't get too attached to footwear in this job," says Held, a burly giant who delivers lines so dry, you're never quite sure he's joking.

PUPPY MILLS Nineteen dogs were rescued by the ASPCA from a house of horrors in Missouri last year.

"You want a course in animal cruelty, Missouri's your state: tigers, reptiles, dog fights. It's the world capital of puppy mills."

This case presented him a special challenge: The door of the unit was broken. Held somehow threaded his six-feet-two frame through a rusty window. Using a control pole, he snared the panicked dogs and handed them up to staffers holding crates. Happily, most of the rescues were on the smaller side: beagle mixes under 30 pounds. It got a little gnarlier with the German shepherds, but Held's done this work for 28 years, the past 12 leading a response team for the ASPCA from his home state of Missouri. "You want a crash course in animal cruelty, Missouri's your state," he says. "Tigers, horses, reptiles, dog fights. It's also the world capital of puppy mills."

Often after a seizure by the ASPCA – or "the A," as staffers call it – there are criminal charges pending against the owner and a scrum over custody of the dogs. In this case, however, the hoarder dodged jail time by agreeing to release her pets. (She also signed a binding – or else – waiver that she'd never own dogs again.) The ASPCA had already pivoted to phase two of rescue, installing a temp shelter in a warehouse. Domiciled for weeks there, the dogs were seen by vets, who performed surgery on the most badly injured patients. The ASPCA also flew behaviorists in to assess the mental health of the dogs. They were graded on several axes: fearfulness of people; aggression and hyperarousal; ease of handling and feeding. A few of them scored in the middle range of trauma, meaning the ASPCA could treat and train them at the temporary shelter and prepare them for local adoptions.

But the bulk were so stricken by the sight of human beings that they soiled themselves and hid in abject terror. Sassy was one of those petrified dogs. Besides her sundry ailments – a coat severely scarred by mange; "hookworms, whipworms, a grade-three heart murmur, pain from her skin condition, an ear infection, a low body-condition score (3/9), and grade-two, -three dental disease," per her intake form – her psyche was so scrambled by neglect and cruelty that she lived in a state of dread. Staffers had to turn their backs when they fed her. She couldn't bear being *looked at*, let alone touched. Failing an intervention, she'd join the 400,000 dogs put down each year for the crime of being homeless or having behavioral issues. The cruelty of their fate is almost cosmic. Saved from horrific circumstance by cops or rescue teams, they are euthanized shortly after to end their suffering.

But Sassy and her mates from the storage unit had a miracle in store. In the spring of 2020, they were trucked hundreds of miles to the world's first clinic for severely traumatized dogs: the ASPCA's Behavioral Rehabilitation Center (BRC) in Weaverville, North Carolina. There, in three transformative months, they'd get a crash course of nurture and training from data-driven teams of pet behaviorists. In tiny blocks of treatment – 15 minutes a day – they'd haltingly push through their fear of people, discover the joy of being creatures at play, and emerge from lives of unspeakable pain to become someone's wonder dog.

IT IS ASTONISHING to think how indifferent we are in the face of animal suffering. Pigs penned in chutes the size of their bodies on America's factory farms. Egg-laying hens packed 12 to a cage, their crests caked in shit from the birds above them. Breed dogs trapped in puppy-mill crates, never touching grass or feeling sun on their backs from birth to brutal death. In America, we don't just stomach cruelty, we license and sell it in aisle three.

There's another kind of cruelty we turn our backs on: More than a thousand dogs in shelters are put down daily, and virtually all those dogs could have been saved. Roughly one percent of the euthanized pups were sick or posed a threat to someone's safety. The rest were destroyed because their shelter ran out of space – or because their behaviors put off adopters. Distressed dogs yelping and cringing in fear; overanxious pups that paced their crates when approached: It was all too easy to pass them up. As for dogs like Sassy, piebald with mange and gnawing at the bug bites on her shins, there was no chance –

To support the ASPCA's ongoing work to help animals like Sassy and Cheddar, please visit aspca.org/rehab.

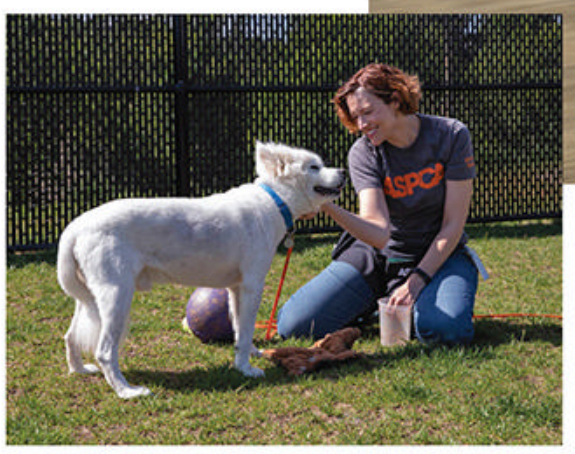
COURTESY OF ASPCA

PLAY TIME
At the BRC, trainers have found success pairing rescues with "helper dogs" [RIGHT] to relax scared or damaged pups.

A DESPERATE NEED
Kristen Collins [BELOW] helped found the BRC after seeing too many dogs put down: "Not only had they never been loved, they've never really been dogs."

WINNING TRUST
The BRC's Darren Young [BOTTOM RIGHT] slowly earns a terrified rescue's trust.

TRAINING CAMP
In 2020, the ASPCA launched its Behavioral Rehabilitation Center [LEFT] outside of Asheville, North Carolina, a facility for rescued dogs that otherwise would be put down. "We need to be able to heal them," says one trainer, "so they can go on and live happy lives."



none – to leave a shelter alive. Until the BRC came along.

First, though, someone had to find those dogs and take them from the people who did them harm. There are laws on the books banning blatant abuses, but they're rarely enforced by the cops. Instead, it falls to the animal-welfare groups to root out crimes against dogs. "In February 2010, we launched our Field Investigations and Response teams to deal with abuse cases," says Matt Bershadker, the ASPCA's president and CEO, who was hired in 2001 and climbed the ranks to become its leader in 2013. (The Humane Society of the United States formed its own unit in 2009. Its yearslong probes of America's puppy mills was featured in this magazine in 2017.)

In the years since the ASPCA began tracking abusers, it's either assisted in or led massive takedowns: the arrests of 10 gangsters in 2013 and the seizure of 367 dogs, the second-biggest dog-fighting bust on record; the rescue of the so-called Missouri 500 dogs – the biggest dog-fighting bust on record – and the arrests of 26 people; the removal, care, and placement of more than 500 dogs from a fetid puppy mill in Iowa in 2021.

But it's one thing to free malnourished dogs who've been chained to trees, scarred and bleeding. It's another entirely to soothe their souls and teach them to trust the species that abused them. "Not only have they never been held and loved, they've never really been dogs," says Kristen Collins, director of the BRC. "They've been widgets for breeders and things gamblers bet on."

Collins is a certified animal behaviorist who joined the ASPCA in 2007. Several years later, she conceived the BRC with her fellow behaviorist at the ASPCA, Pamela Reid. The unit was born of horror and grief, after a particularly gruesome find in Tennessee. One steam-bath afternoon in the summer of 2010, Collins and Reid were summoned by the authorities to a grim tableau. An old man was living at the end of a dirt road in a decrepit trailer packed with dogs. "We counted 85 in terrible shape, both physically and behaviorally," recalls Collins. They were skinny to the point of emaciated – neither food nor water was set out – and there was trash piled everywhere she looked. In those days, the ASPCA had no triage unit, so the team couldn't house or treat the dogs. After brief exams, they were sent to local shelters, where most, if not all, were put down. "It broke our hearts to see so much suffering," says Collins. "For hours, we drove in dead silence." She resolved then and there that they had to do more: "We need to be able to heal them behaviorally so they can go on and live happy lives."

Reid and Collins assembled a roving team to respond to such disasters. "Those early days, we were trying to MacGuyver with a hair clip and a stick of gum," she says. They'd rent an empty warehouse, cull vet techs from local shelters, and do the dirty work of triage care. Giving lime baths to dogs with tick bites and ringworm, making boxes and platforms from plywood scraps so mama dogs could escape their week-old pups: "It was all improv, but we were building a framework for the holistic model to come."

A year later, Collins got a call from a district attorney in Kentucky: 120 dogs had come out of a puppy mill in Morehead in deplorable condition. By then, the ASPCA had its response team ready. Collins worked for weeks at its temp site nearby, throwing everything she'd learned in 10 years of training at those dogs. "We tried really simple things, like drive-by treating, where you toss a piece of cheese into a dog's kennel as you're walking past it," says Collins, who holds a master's in animal behavior from the University of Illinois. "They're so undersocialized they can't bear you coming in. But over time, they learn to connect you with something yummy, and start coming closer to the door."

Another ploy that worked was bringing in "helper" dogs: pairing less-fearful pups with panicked ones to play in short sessions. "I can't overstate the importance of helper dogs," says Collins. "Not only did they help relax the scared ones, they modeled all the stuff that dogs do. Sniffing, chasing, tugging, playing: All that was new to those dogs."

Over weeks of treatments, Collins saw "marked improvement" in a large majority of cases. Even the very fearful started sniffing around their handlers, letting themselves be touched and fed by hand. Here was early evidence, via small-batch data, that badly abused dogs could bounce back. Collins and Reid made their pitch to the ASPCA's chief; Bershadker pitched his board of directors. He came back with the money for a pilot program: a temporary clinic for the "worst of the worst" cases.

Collins and Reid rented kennel space from a shelter in Madison, New Jersey. Before opening their doors, they did "brain-dump sessions," scribbling every technique they could possibly think of on a whiteboard. Out of those sessions came the 30 or 40 protocols that form the core of care at BRC. "We took the biggest blocks dogs have to getting adopted and broke them down to small parts," says Collins. She cites leashing as an example. It can evoke terror in dogs who've never been handled before: "You'll see them freak out, go into gator rolls. They'll flop to the floor and roll over and over, trying to get that thing off their neck."

So she and her trainers took it beat by beat. In those first days, all they did was show the dog a leash

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF ASPCA; JESSE BARBER; COURTESY OF ASPCA, 3

while feeding it treats and rations. Next, they let the dog sniff the drag line, a thin cord that clips to collars. Then, they attached it and played follow me, in which the trainer dropped cheese cubes and stepped off quickly, inviting the dog to chase. "She feels the weight of the line and gets used to it," says Collins. "Once that happens, we grab it and take a few steps, dropping cheese behind us."

Repeated over and over, the dog gets used to the pressure around its neck. Soon, it's ready for a real leash – and the next challenge, walking outdoors.

When the Madison site opened in 2013, Collins hoped to save half those haunted dogs. Within months, she had to raise the bar: Almost 90 percent of the dogs in her care improved enough for adoption. Once too terrified to leave their kennel, dogs were coming out to play with other dogs and forming attachments to their handlers. They took to being leashed and walked on trails, went for short rides in staffers' cars, and didn't melt down in public parks when exposed to new dogs and people. "We knew dogs were resilient, but this was something else," says Collins. "It was an ability to trust – and forgive."

The clinic's two-year lease was extended twice. Meanwhile, the ASPCA scoured East Coast states to build a permanent home for the BRC. They found their site in Weaverville, a 15-minute drive from Asheville. Encircled by Trumpland, Asheville's as much a symbol as it is a city: the promise of an agnostic, tolerant South that never seems to come to pass. It's a peach-fizz town of gastro pubs and gender-fluid teens rocking dusty Chucks and hair colors unseen in nature. Seemingly everyone's got a skateboard or a graphic-arts side gig – and dogs are part of the mix. You can't go a block here without stepping around someone's rescue in a tie-dyed harness or Pride bandanna.

WONDER DOG
Sassy was covered in mange when she was rescued from a trailer with dozens of dogs. After BRC rehab, she was adopted by Shanna Phillips and forged a lasting bond.

"Asheville greeted us with open arms," says Bershadker. "It was a progressive community that loved pets and animals," and had a census of sentient twentysomethings. The ASPCA bought a parcel in 2014 and erected a clinic like none other. It looms like a spaceship behind its cyclone fence: a sleek, low-slung compound in matte-white brick on 12 sloping acres and trails. Each of the 52 dogs in treatment has a kennel the size of a small dorm room: glass doors and walls, a futon to nap on, and saloon doors to their own fenced dog run.

The clinic is divided into A and B pods. Each pod has play spaces inside and out, treatment labs called Real-Life Rooms, and a high-gloss kitchen for food prep. The pods both share a gym – yes, a gym for pups, with tunnels and cones and an obstacle course – as well as a dog park with high, screened walls so the dogs aren't fazed by passing cars. In the afternoon, play groups of six or seven dogs run themselves ragged out there. They chase cubes of cheese and hot-dog bits tossed by trainers and the occasional guest. There are 35 full-time staffers on campus, dozens of volunteers pulling regular shifts, and a robust list of enrichment options available to the dogs. Their daily treatment, however, lasts exactly a quarter of an hour. "They're so undersocialized that it's all they can take," says Collins. "Push them any longer and they'll crash."

BY THE TIME Sassy got to the BRC, her physical woes had responded well to treatment. There were scars on her nose and paws that she'd wear forever, but on a dog so pretty, they looked like freckles, not badges of gross neglect. Her psyche, however, was another story. She was scared "to the point of extreme" around staff and "looking for escape routes," per her case file. "Especially our male staff," says Darren Young, a behavior specialist who worked with Sassy, then handled her adoption to Shanna Phillips. "That made it somewhat challenging," he says with a laugh.

Young, who's 49, is an outlier on staff. He and his wife, Christine, owned an IT company and volunteered at New Jersey shelters. In 2013, they launched a project to house homeless pit bulls and connected with the ASPCA's temp site in Madison. There, they got so invested in the work that they studied to become trainers themselves. Hired by the ASPCA, they sold their house and firm and moved to North

JESSE BARBER

Carolina with the BRC. They're older and better established than most of their colleagues, scruffy thirtysomethings who've kicked around a while before finding their lane in life. Their uniforms – gray T-shirts, blue cargo pants, and utility belts packed with treats – neatly convey the grunge aesthetic of animal-welfare work. There's an urgency in their gait as they move about the unit: Dogs are distressed in every kennel.

With Sassy, that panic was weirdly mixed. She was, as they say here, "conflicted." On the one hand, she was terrified of people. On the other, she was curious – and hungry. "Man, that little girl loved to eat; she was so food-motivated," says Young. To work past her fear, he employed a technique that's known as "treat and retreat." Those first 10 days, he'd enter her kennel and soft-toss kibble from a distance. Then, bit by bit, he'd lob it closer and step off while she ate it. Eventually, she came near enough to snatch food from his hand. When she did that, he'd give her a sly scratch behind the ear, the first bit of handling she'd had. By the two-week mark, she was targeting his palm, touching it with her nose for kibble.

An affinity was forming – highly unusual in a dog so new to treatment. The next step for Young was to spread the love: transfer her affections to other people. Young and his team did rotations with Sassy so that she bonded with all five of them over time. Then they brought in novel people: volunteers who clean kennels and do the endless loads of laundry. "We'd have them just sit there and say nothing to the dog, maybe toss her cubes of cheese," says Young. Eventually, Sassy came over to the stranger – first, to sniff them, then to bogart hot dogs from their hand.

"It was amazing to watch her open up," says Young. "She still barked a lot – they named her Sassy for a reason! – but she came a long way in a short time." That she did: Sassy almost set the record for swiftest graduation at BRC. The typical course of treatment here is 13 weeks; Sassy completed the program in just five. She got her framed diploma and a name card coded green, meaning she was ready for adoption. But life had another jolt in store for her. It was early April 2020 – the country was locked down tight by the first wave of Covid.

Young posted Sassy's photo on Petfinder and Adoptapet.com, and reached out to several shelters in the region. When Phillips saw her picture, she was smitten: "There was something in Sassy's face," she says. "She looked like she was smiling. I knew it in my soul: That dog was mine."

Phillips reached out to Young. She was anguished to hear that someone else had claimed her first. "Bullshit," thought Phillips. She paid Sassy three calls in five days. That first time, she sat in one of the smaller play yards as Young led Sassy in. The little dog ran to the far end of the yard and sat with her back turned most of the visit. "She hates me," Phillips thought – but returned to BRC. The next time, Young brought a helper dog along. Sassy softened enough to creep near Phillips and scarf the treats that she and her boyfriend lobbed. Things went well enough that the couple took her for a walk. The moment they rounded a corner, though, Sassy flopped to her belly. "She'd lost sight of me," says Young, who'd strolled away on purpose. "I needed to see if she was ready to leave." As it turned out, not quite yet.

Finally, on their third date, Sassy let Phillips hold her. She picked up the dog and bundled her in tight. They stood there swaying and nuzzling in the breeze. Lifting her head, Sassy anointed Shanna with the faintest flicker of a kiss.

IN THE NINE YEARS since the ASPCA funded its pilot site, the BRC has rehabbed more than 500 dogs and placed them in what staffers call "forever homes." None of those pups were finished products when they finished treatment. "We get them far enough to thrive in someone's house, but the rest is up to that family," says Young. "The [dogs] are gonna be afraid still, and there's gonna be behaviors. But if you give 'em the love and support they need, just watch what they become in a year."

NEW MODEL The BRC method is expanding to three clinics and an academy to train new frontline staff.

"In 2000, 90 percent of the dogs in pounds were euthanized within days of arrival. Last year, that figure was nine percent."

Which brings us to the countless adoptable dogs languishing at shelters around the country. We have come a far distance in "live releases" – the number of pups adopted – over the past two decades. In 2000, 90 percent of the dogs in "pounds" were euthanized within days of arrival. Last year, that figure was nine percent, an extraordinary, if incomplete, achievement. For 40 years, the leaders of the animal-welfare movement have waged a two-front war to save pets' lives. The first was pushing for spay-neuter laws to shrink the number of homeless dogs. A single unhoused female could birth 600 pups, most of whom would lead wretched lives that ended with a pentobarbital shot. "Ten million pets were put down each year: That was the number we used to shock the public into action," says Tom Colvin, the CEO of the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, who's been a powerhouse in the field for 50 years. More than 30 states now mandate sterilization, easing – but not eliminating – the crush at shelters.

The second front was changing people's hearts and minds about where they got their pets. "There was so much stigma attached to dog pounds, which used to be located by the sewage plants," says Colvin. But the rescue movement enlightened the public on the virtues of shelter dogs. Adoptions have spiked since the early aughts, then soared out of sight the past two years. Twenty-three million dogs were adopted during the pandemic, a 600 percent increase over the norm.

Still, 3 million dogs remain in shelters, many in need of clinical care. The ASPCA can only treat about a hundred dogs a year at its North Carolina location. This fall, it will open a significantly larger unit for dogs with moderate trauma: the Cruelty Recovery Center in Columbus, Ohio. And by summer of next year, it will launch a third clinic: the Recovery and Rehabilitation Center in Pawling, New York, for hyperaroused dogs whose manic behaviors prevent them from being adopted. But no organization can do this job alone. What's needed is a second wave of rescue pros: a national surge of partners and trainers to prepare those unhoused dogs to go home.

To build that wave, the ASPCA put its wallet on the table. Beyond the $40 million to construct its three clinics, it funded an academy at the BRC to teach frontline workers from other shelters. Behind its clinic sits a handsome block of dorm rooms for visiting staff and executives.

"I've got a team there now for a core retreat; I'd go every month if they let me," says Alison Reder, the vice president of operations at Wayside Waifs, a 200-dog shelter in Kansas City, Missouri. Inspired by what they learned, Wayside's leaders built a replica of the BRC behind their busy shelter. "The difference in the dogs that go through our clinic – it's night and day," says Reder. "We had a pit bull named Angelo that no one wanted; he spent 200 days at our shelter. But three weeks at our clinic, he went home with a family. You've never seen a dog so happy, or relieved."

LAST MAY, the ASPCA got another of those calls: a house-of-horrors dwelling in Ohio. Out of a single trailer came 90 dogs, living – and dying – on counters and cabinets and holes they'd dug in the wall. One of those dogs was Cheddar, a small beagle mix who looks a bit like Sassy. Unlike Sassy, that dog was no puppy: He'd gone blind in both eyes from years of exposure to the contaminants in the house. To describe his other ailments would be piling on. All that's germane was the state of his psyche when Cheddar arrived last summer.

"Oh, boy," says Christine Young. "I don't know if I've had a tougher case. That dog didn't leave its kennel on its own for at least two months."

Young, who's married to Sassy's trainer Darren Young, was born to treat broken dogs. She's soulful, soft-eyed, and speaks in spa tones, but you need more than heart for dogs like Cheddar – you need an eye for the slightest sign of progress, and the patience to wait as long it takes. Young would not hear the murmurs of other staffers or her own nagging fear about euthanasia. As long as Cheddar exhibited something to build on – an uptick in appetite; an interest in other dogs – she was resolved to keep pushing.

"With Cheddar, his blindness made it so much harder; dogs learn to trust through body language," Young says. "He had no visual cues." Finally, months along, Young had a breakthrough mo- [*Cont. on 135*]

JESSE BARBER

The Eddie Van Halen Nobody Knew

Over the last five years of his life, the rock icon had a secret correspondence with a former music journalist, spilling gossip, gripes, hopes, fears — and revealing himself like never before

By Blair Fischer

"HOW'S MICHAEL ANTHONY DOING?" • That's the first thing I say to Eddie Van Halen, the legendary guitarist and co-namesake of the rock band Van Halen. • Rather, that's the first thing I say to someone who possibly is but probably isn't Eddie Van Halen. I mean, who am I kidding? There's no way the real Eddie Van Halen's email address should be available for anyone to find in a public database – and it sure as shit shouldn't be an America Online account. • In other words, this can't be him, which is why the first email I send is something this stupid and slapdash. Those familiar with the history of Van Halen know Anthony – the band's original bassist – was not so much fired from Van Halen as he was replaced in 2006 with Eddie's son, Wolfgang, without anyone ever bothering to tell Anthony. At least that's how Anthony's told it. So, my opening line is the type of thing you might see a Van Halen traditionalist hold up on a giant sign at a concert just to troll Anthony's replacement. • This isn't just a fan talking. In a former life, I'd been a music journalist, including some time as an editor for

Eddie Van Halen in 2015

EVH
wolfgang

ROLLING STONE's website. Back then, I got to interview everyone from Ozzy Osbourne to Diddy. But now it's 2015, and I'm more than a decade removed from my dream job. Today, as a market researcher for a health-insurance company, I stare at data tables till my eyes water and monitor my employer's social media mentions, featuring angry posts about how only "fraudelent fucks" and "#scumbags" would work there.

Sending emails like this has become something of a pastime, an exercise in nostalgia when the drudgery of my workday becomes too much to handle. Not long ago, I discovered that an old login I had to LexisNexis – a directory lawyers and journalists use that shows, among other things, a person's criminal record, residences, phone numbers, and, yes, email addresses – had never been deactivated. After using it to look up a couple of exes, I'd turned to rock stars. On a lark, I'd reached out to who Nexis told me was Gene Simmons, Eddie Vedder, Stevie Nicks, and pretty much every member of the original Guns N' Roses. But I'd gotten nary a response.

So, I fire off the Michael Anthony email at close to 5 o'clock on Sunday, May 31, 2015, and figure that'll be the beginning and end of it. But 51 minutes later: "You've Got Mail!" That response kicks off a five-plus-year correspondence that would change my life.

I DON'T ACTUALLY see the email until Monday morning, when I get to work. My insides flutter just a bit.

"Not nearly as good as Wolfgang Van Halen, nor will he ever!! Who the fuck is this, you would know that if you had a brain and ears!!"

Whoever this is, they're pretty protective of Wolfie. Here's another thing: The time stamp on the email is 6:46 p.m. – or what time it would have been in California, where Eddie Van Halen is known to live, when it was sent.

And this is a bit of a reach, but twice the writer uses double-exclamation points – the same way Van Halen does on the song "Everybody Wants Some!!" That's always annoyed the shit out of me and, quite frankly, makes me enjoy the song less. Most normal people either use one or three exclamation points as a point of emphasis or volume. But two? I start thinking this person is either Eddie Van Halen or the world's greatest Eddie Van Halen impersonator.

There is one other thing I notice. Next to the email address is a name: Edward Van Halen.

But, no, it'll take more than that to catfish me. So I write back immediately, throwing in a reference to Van Halen's *A Different Kind of Truth,* which was released three years earlier. It's their first album featuring David Lee Roth since *1984* (released in the titular year), and seven of its 13 songs have origins that date back to before the band released its self-titled debut in 1978.

"Regardless, you screwed up the classic lineup and, with all due respect to your son, with DLR's voice in the shitter, you need Anthony more now than ever. And how 'bout some new music you didn't write in 1975? You are super lazy."

BLAIR FISCHER *is working on a book about his friendship with Eddie Van Halen.*

My question appears to strike a nerve. A few hours later, five new emails arrive in my inbox. They're a bit stream-of-consciousness, filled with rage and incredulity. I speed-read them all.

The writer says they "can't control Roth's voice" and mocks my stopgap solution that Anthony rejoin the band to help cover for Roth's vocal inadequacies. "And now you think Mike is a 'lead singer,' " reads one email. "He sounds like Mickey Mouse. He just has a high voice." Then they blame Roth for leaving the band originally in 1985 and lament the decision to bring Sammy Hagar in to replace him later that year: "Once Hagar joined it was never the same."

"This is the last thing I'm going to say," reads the final email. "When Hagar quit, Mike went with him instead of staying with Alex and me. That was as much of a betrayal as Roth blindsiding us when he quit. We didn't see either one coming!! All we had was ourselves, Alex and myself. Wolf happened to be there and [it was] fun again. Life is change. I can't control it any more than you can. If I could, I would change a lot of things starting with never having my first drink and maybe sticking to piano instead of guitar!!"

"When Hagar quit, Mike went with him. That was as much of a betrayal as Roth blindsiding us. We didn't see either one coming!! All we had was Alex and myself."

Holy shit. That's a lot to unpack. And those damn double-exclamation points!!

Not including the pre-Van Halen band Mammoth, the 2015 incarnation of Van Halen is their fourth, with Eddie and his brother, Alex, the drummer, serving as the constants. It came to be when Wolfgang got permission from his dad and Uncle Alex to phone Roth and ask if he'd be interested in jamming with the band. He agreed, and it's been Eddie, Alex, Wolfgang, and Roth ever since. As Roth told crowds on the 2007 tour, the lineup was "three parts original, one part inevitable."

But it was the classic lineup, featuring Anthony instead of Wolf, that had sold 57 million albums on the strength of ubiquitous classic-rock jams like "Jump," "Unchained," and "Dance the Night Away." It lasted from 1974 until Roth quit in 1985 to try to become a film star (he failed) and solo artist (moderate success). If you include the two new songs Roth contributed to 1996's *Best of Van Halen, Volume 1* and a trainwreck reunion at the MTV Video Music Awards the same year, this period marks Roth's third stint in the band.

Still, Eddie and Roth have never gotten along. For the many years Roth wasn't in the band, Eddie often wouldn't even mention him by name, instead referring to "the previous guy," "a certain person" or, every once in a while, "Cubic Zirconia," an unsubtle jab at Roth's "Diamond Dave" sobriquet. An equally mature Roth once said he was tasked with replacing three members from his "last band" for his first solo album.

Other than Roth, Eddie's other nemeses have been alcohol, cigarettes, and cancer. He started smoking and drinking heavily early in his career as a way to "treat" his performance anxiety and, despite many attempts to quit, he just couldn't. He made a gallant effort around the time Wolf joined the band, but fell off the wagon again just before the 2007 tour. Shows were canceled and Ed returned to rehab. Now, finally, after years of relapses, he's clean and sober.

Amid all of that, in 2000, Eddie learned he had tongue cancer, which spread to his esophagus; two years later, a third of his tongue was removed, after which he was deemed cancer-free.

Considering all the real Eddie Van Halen has endured – and on the off chance this is actually him – it may be time to soften my tone.

"Damn, OK . . . didn't mean to get you all riled up," I respond 21 minutes after the sender's most recent email. "Maybe Mike was mad b/c VH wasn't doing anything for years... I mean it took, what, 15 years to do *Truth*? Just sayin' . . ."

It works. After saying this would be the "last thing I'm going to say," the writer says much, much more – enough to more or less confirm that it's indeed the real Eddie Van Halen. (A representative for Van Halen said the band and Eddie's family declined to comment on the correspondence. A representative for Wolfgang also declined comment.)

That same day, he tells me he "gets riled up because I'm always the one who gets blamed for everything." Then he eviscerates Roth, or at least that's how I see it at the time. It'll prove tame by future standards.

"The reason it took that long for *Truth* is Roth, including all the rehashed demos," he begins. That's the same reason, he says, the band has "nothing but a live record [2015's *Tokyo Dome Live in Concert*] to show for three years downtime." Roth, he explains, only wants to be onstage doing his "Vaudeville shtick!!" He then says that "Roth is out of his mind" and not at all interested in rock & roll, which makes recording new music a near impossibility. He says Roth only likes "dance music" and "hates bands like AC/DC," adding that Roth calls that band's fans "culturally illiterate."

"Well, I guess that makes me one of them 'cause I love AC/DC and its simplicity," he continues, saying the band inspired many Van Halen songs he'd written, including "Panama," "Drop Dead Legs," and "Good Enough." But because Roth doesn't like their music, he says, "I have no outlet. It's very frustrating. If people only knew the truth, they wouldn't believe some of the shit that goes on and what we put up with. Probably not much longer though. I'm too old for this shit!! I really wish things were different, but they're not!! All the best man!!"

I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed. For this not to be Eddie Van Halen, you'd have to believe a weapons-grade EVH doppelgänger was just lying in wait in hopes that some internet troll would mysteriously acquire his email address

PREVIOUS PAGE: PEGGY SIROTA/TRUNK ARCHIVE

and then use it to bombard him with fanboy questions. That's some QAnon-level crazy. But, then again, why? And why me? So, almost exactly 48 hours after my initial email, I just ask.

"You know, I asked myself the same question and there are actually a few reasons," begins the response. "For one, whenever we do interviews we can't really tell the whole truth because if I said in an interview what I have said to you certain people would get pissed." And since the band at least appears from the outside to be working together, "it wouldn't do much good to say that I think our own lead singer sucks and is a complete mental case pre-Madonna." The other reason? "It's almost a strange kind of therapy to tell the truth to someone you don't even know!! Make any sense to you??!!"

He had me at "pre-Madonna."

Fairly convinced now that I'm talking with Eddie Van Halen, I decide to offer up my name. And my journalism credentials, too. I say that I'm a huge Van Halen fan, and that I hope to meet him when the band plays in Tinley Park, about 60 miles southeast of my suburban Chicago home, the next month.

"Well hi Blair!! I had a feelin' but that's neither here nor there," probably-Eddie Van Halen writes back. "Are you a male or female?? I know a Blair that's a chick and 2 that are guys!! Ed."

Ed. For the first time, he signs off as "Ed." I feel like a mobster who just got made: I get to call him "Ed."

TOP OF THE WORLD Above: Eddie Van Halen with a signature Frankenstrat in 1978. Left: With David Lee Roth in 1984. Roth would quit the band to go solo the next year.

VAN HALEN were the first band I liked that was undeniably cool. I was 12 years old and weaning myself off Air Supply, Christopher Cross, and other early-Eighties, *Casey Kasem American Top 40* drek for what I thought was much cooler shit – like Styx, REO Speedwagon, and Journey. Then one day in the school cafeteria, a friend popped Van Halen's eponymous debut into a GE cassette player and pressed play. And Jesus fuckin' Christ. Even on a low-grade, three-and-a-half-inch speaker, it was a mindfuck.

Of the original four band members, Ed always seemed like the biggest mystery. Mostly it's those unduplicable legato notes he makes flow from his custom-made red, white, and black Frankenstrat guitar. Or the whammy-bar dives and sorcerous two-handed finger tapping he popularized, which unintentionally helped inspire the birth of hair metal. In any rock & roll era, past, present, or future, Ed was and will always be ahead of his time.

Unlike his musicianship, his words are generally tame and, at times, seem almost scripted. It's as if he never knows how to answer boilerplate questions about how it feels to be some sort of rock god, telling MTV in 1988, "It's nice, ya know, but I'm just some punk kid who plays guitar." He's usually careful not to bash Roth in interviews, too.

As far back as 1982, Ed was biting his tongue. During an interview with *Guitar Player* magazine to help promote the release of *Diver Down*, he was asked why there were so few guitar solos on the album. Ed responded, "Dave said, 'No more fucking guitar solos,' " which is a little like Dennis Rodman telling Michael Jordan "No more dunks." "He's on an ego trip," Ed continued, before deciding to muzzle himself. "He's always been, whatever…" Then he added: "And if you print this, I'm gonna fuckin' come to your house and blow your ass away."

He probably should have kept his mouth shut, too, when it came to his tongue cancer. Instead of blaming it on his nicotine addiction, he claimed it was the result of resting brass and copper guitar picks between his lips while performing. He later told Howard Stern, "I cured my cancer in a way that's not exactly legal in this country. I'd tell you, but I don't want to go to jail." Hagar offered more details in his autobiography. "[Ed] told me he cured himself by having pieces of his tongue liquefied and injected into his body," Hagar wrote. "He also told me when he had his hip replacement, he stayed awake through the operation and helped the doctors drill the hole. What a fruitcake."

While Ed hasn't told me anything that outrageous, that he's been so open and available to me probably qualifies. We've been emailing and texting several times a week since my snarky overture, and now I feel like a contestant on a dating reality show: Time to see if this'll work in *real* reality. Van Halen is gearing up for their first tour in two years, where they'll be playing to about 15,000 rabid fans every night. It's on the 10th stop of their 41-date summer tour where Ed and I are scheduled to finally meet.

Leading up to our meet-and-greet, Ed tells me that, following an endoscopy and biopsies of his esophagus, he's cancer-free. "Yippee!!" he emails me. "That is more important than anything. If you don't have your health, you got nothin'!!"

Truthfully, I had just assumed he was well. I'm no oncologist, but I know there's no way a 60-year-old vaper is performing two-hour shows for 41 nights in the dead of summer if he's in any real danger.

As the show gets closer, Ed also confirms what we already assumed was true – he and Roth do *not* get along.

Up until recently, Ed says, Roth at least spoke to Alex, but now the brothers have no communication with him at all. He continues, "I don't know what I ever did to him, but so it goes," adding, "I wouldn't be surprised if he somehow implodes onstage or does something really, really stupid."

Not only are Ed and Roth incommunicado, Ed says leading up to the July 5 tour opener in Auburn, Washington, that "I have a feeling Roth will not sing any of the deep cuts. I think we should play them with or without him, what do you think??"

That's insane is what I think. Roth can't sing for shit at this point, and everyone knows it – but Van Halen karaoke?

Ed attempts to clarify. "I'm talking about asking the audience to just sing along and tell them Roth doesn't want to sing them," he begins. "And if they go nuts, then tell them we're gonna spend the next 15 to 20 minutes just you and us, without Roth. I think it's gonna force Roth to come around and it can be kinda fun without him."

Mercifully, somehow, Roth comes around, and, far as I can tell, sings on every song at every show, including the one I attend on July 24 at the Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre in Tinley Park, Illinois, where I finally get to meet Ed. I'm with my plus-one, friend and rock photographer Barry Brecheisen, who'll be photographing the show.

We're leaning against the white pockmarked concrete wall that snakes around the backstage corridor, staring at the cement-gray double doors that serve to demarcate dressing rooms

FROM TOP: FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; ANDY FREEBERG/GETTY IMAGES

and business offices from security areas and craft services. That's the one Ed walks through. Prior to this moment, the closest I'd ever been to him was 27 years earlier, when, as a college freshman, I sat third-row center on the *OU812* tour. I even caught a guitar pick Hagar sidearmed into the crowd.

Some still see Eddie Van Halen as the trim, suspenders-wearing spark plug with long, tousled brown hair and an impish, thousand-watt grin. You know, the smiley guy in the "Jump" video, who always looks like he knows something you don't.

On this day, only some of that is still true: He's still thin, but so, too, is his short, gray hair. He walks slowly, slightly hunched, cradling his Pomeranian, Kody, as if he's handling a nuclear football. Still, he seems peaceful, without a care in the world.

Shortly after Ed slips into his dressing room, we're told to follow suit. We slowly walk toward the door just as he opens it slightly and peeks through.

"Which one is Blair?" he asks eagerly.

"Me," I respond, now just inches away.

He sizes me up quickly, flashes that famous grin, and then pulls me in for a giant hug. "You're not how I pictured you," he says with a big smile. I don't think to ask what he expected. Probably taller.

It's just the three of us in this dimly lit, cavernous dressing room. Some guitars lean against the wall, though none I immediately recognize from *Creem* or Van Halen's many music videos. There's a rolling wardrobe rack tucked into a corner, too, but there isn't anything on it. We all flop onto a fraying black leather couch and, almost immediately, Ed picks up right where we left off.

"Fuckin' Roth," he fumes, shaking his head.

As he rants about Roth's vocals, his surfer-dude parlance matches what I've heard in countless interviews, as if it were cryogenically frozen from the Seventies, only now with a little more Camel-stained gravel. After about 15 minutes of bullshitting, we're told it's time to go, just as a small group of kids is ushered in. We don't know why they're there, but it becomes apparent they're sick and this is something akin to their Make-A-Wish. It's touching, and throws me a bit off my game, so much so that I forget to get a photo of us together. Ed does, however, give me a guitar pick and signs my *Fair Warning* CD.

Before we depart, he tells me to text him later to tell him what we thought of the show, and we hug one last time. Next time, I think, I'll bring my son with me to meet him.

AFTER THE TOUR, I implore Ed to reconsider bringing back Hagar, mostly because he can still sing, unlike Roth. He texts me that Mike would be part of the package if Hagar were to rejoin the band and that he doesn't "think I'd be able to play with him after Wolf!!"

When Roth left Van Halen, Hagar filled his shoes admirably. After all, he was the original frontman for the Seventies hard-rock outfit Montrose, an early Van Halen influence. The new lineup – known colloquially as "Van Hagar" – released four more albums and racked up 27 million more in album sales behind "love" songs like "Why Can't This Be Love," "Love Walks In," and "When It's Love."

In the years that followed, Hagar was fired (if you believe Hagar's version) or quit (if you believe Ed's), and briefly replaced by Roth, before Van Halen turned to its third lead singer, ex-Extreme frontman Gary Cherone. He was ousted after only one shit-sandwich-y album. Then came a chaotic reunion tour with Hagar, the last to feature either Hagar or Anthony.

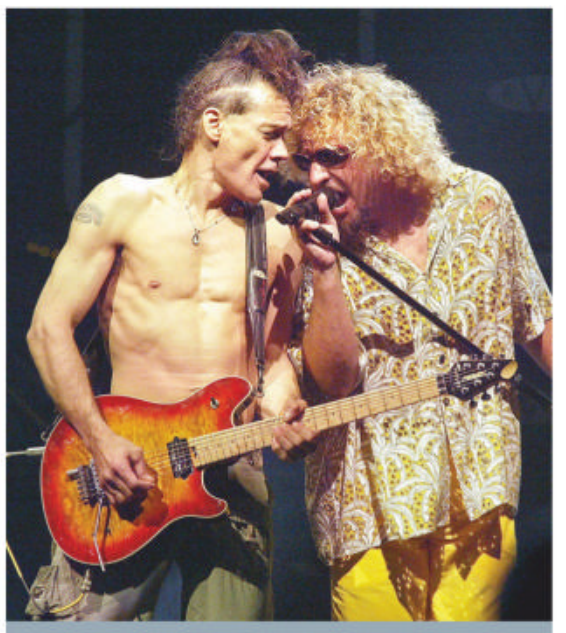
The hostility Ed has for Hagar is arguably more dug in than it is for Roth, and totally different. When it comes to Roth, Ed's rants are about his abysmal singing and rock-star egomania, while his Hagar slams boil down to claims of greed ("it's all about money with Hagar," he says at one point, adding in a seeming reference to Hagar's successful tequila brand, "He used the band to elevate himself!!") and a relentless drive for publicity. As Ed saw it, Hagar "just can't open his mouth without saying Van Halen." Even when Hagar had just formed his band Chickenfoot, Ed texts me, "instead of talking about his new band, all he did was basically say how much better they were than Van Halen. So, he's actually our biggest promo man." (Representatives for both Roth and Hagar declined comment to ROLLING STONE.)

On Jan. 26, 2016, Ed turns 61 years old. I wish him a happy birthday. Soon after, I send him a screen grab: It's of Hagar wishing him one, too, on Facebook; Hagar does the same on Twitter. The message includes a photo of Hagar and Ed onstage together. Ed seems genuinely surprised. He decides to respond, knowing, he says, it'll "stir up some shit!!"

Ed is right – he stirs up shit. He thanks Hagar for the wishes on Twitter and, almost immediately, sends the blogosphere into a tizzy. Everyone everywhere with even a passing interest in Van Halen begins conjecturing that Hagar is back in the band. Hagar himself is shocked Ed responds to the message, and goes as far as reaching out to the Van Halen camp to confirm it's really him who responded, Ed tells me later.

Months later, rumors of an impending reunion with Hagar persist. On Oct. 13, five months after we'd begun our correspondence, I tell Ed it's Hagar's birthday, but that if he wishes him a happy one on Twitter everyone will assume the rumors are true.

"I guess I won't be then!!" he responds.



BETTER DAYS With Sammy Hagar in 2004. After years of conflict, they reconciled before Eddie's death in 2020.

"Maybe we get the whole shebang up there. Wolf opens, Roth and Hagar swap every other song, and we squeeze Mike in somewhere!! Stranger things have happened!!"

IN AUGUST 2017, in preparation for stem-cell shots, doctors do an MRI of Ed's neck and back and discover swollen lymph nodes. He gets a CT scan which shows a mass in his lung. But they do an invasive search and find nothing.

His doctor is stumped. He tells Ed that whatever he saw on his CT scan, 70 percent of the time turns out to be cancer. But not this time.

"All I know," he texts me, "is I'm one blessed, lucky motherfucker!!"

Twenty days later, I check in just to make sure everything is still OK. I don't get a response that evening, which is unlike him – but I don't pay it much mind. He always gets back to me. The next day, I'm in my home office, listening to R.E.M. and scrolling through Facebook on my laptop when I feel my phone vibrate. I pull it out of my pocket – it's Ed. All I expect to read when I ask how he's doing is something along the lines of, "I'm doing well, buddy, how are you??" That's pretty standard, and it always makes me feel good. *Buddy*. But not this time. Instead, he tells me, "I have lung cancer." It's stage 3. Feeling faint, I reread it, just to make sure.

In October 2017, Ed begins what will be frequent trips to Europe for treatments not available in the States. No one, other than I'm assuming family and close friends, knows. I wish him well, wanting so bad to hear, once again, that it was all a big mistake. He gives me impossibly thorough updates, using terminology I need my wife, a physician assistant, to dumb down for me. And off he goes to Germany and Switzerland to make himself a guinea pig in a desperate attempt to prolong his life. One procedure, he says, "felt like two hands digging a 44-magnum bullet out of my chest."

I try my hardest to keep things light, never knowing how or if I should even address his health. It's not always about Roth or Hagar or that infamous tour-rider demand that prohibited promoters from including any brown M&M's in backstage bowls of the candy during 1982's global Hide Your Sheep Tour. ("They would actually hire a bunch of old ladies with hair nets and gloves to [remove them]," Ed texts me. "It was a pretty funny sight – like a small assembly line!!")

Often, it's just small talk. Ed binge-watched *House of Cards* before me, in June 2017, and the next year, I return the favor. "Are there new episodes without what's his name??" he asks, referencing disgraced star Kevin Spacey.

JON HILL/MEDIANEWS GROUP/"BOSTON HERALD"/GETTY IMAGES

Another time I'm sitting out back on a hot summer day when I get a reminder from Facebook that's it been exactly three years since Ed and I met in Tinley Park. I text him a photo of him and Wolf from the show. It makes me wonder what he looks like now, so I ask if he uses a VIP entrance to avoid getting recognized at any of the myriad hospitals he frequents.

"People really don't recognize me like in the '80s or '90s," he responds. "They might look at me like it might be me and sometimes they ask." Other times he hears them say as they walk away, "Fuck, that was Eddie Van Halen!!"

IN DECEMBER 2018, Roth does an interview with Vulture in which he more than hints at a Van Halen summer reunion tour featuring the original classic lineup (so, Anthony instead of Wolf). He specifically mentions Yankee Stadium as a tour stop, as well as a bunch of bands that may join Van Halen at the Bronx show, including Metallica, Foo Fighters, and Guns N' Roses. My gut feeling is it's the type of overwrought rumor typically started by some bored Reddit troll. Ed never said a thing to me about this, and he's in no condition to perform. Quickly, Ed ends the speculation – at least on my end. Roth, he says, has recklessly jumped the gun.

"I told [Roth] it ain't happening 'til I'm healthy enough to make it through a show!!" he texts me. "That is not now!!"

I can only imagine the crossfire of emotions. As if Ed didn't have enough on his plate already, now he needs damage control and a muzzle for Roth on top of a clean bill of health. None of that is forthcoming. Ed is just barely hanging on.

"I feel like shit!!" he tells me. "Low hemoglobin and jet lag!! Not a good combo!!"

No matter how bad things get, though, Ed never seems to lose hope. It's humbling to see someone so close to the finish line behave like they're still at the starting gate. A couple of years ago, before the cancer came back, he'd told me that his number-one priority was for "Wolf to finish his [solo] record," adding, "Everything else is secondary!!" I'd shrugged it off. But now here he is, frail, tattered, his scissor-kicking days done – and he's raring to go.

He tells me film composer Hans Zimmer just asked him to do the theme song to *Top Gun: Maverick*. Keanu Reeves wants him to do something for one of his *John Wick* films, and his friend, Bryan Adams, wants to collaborate, too.

"For me, this is fucking exciting times," Ed texts me on Sept. 22, 2019. "It ain't the end of anything – it's a whole new beginning!!"

Meanwhile, Roth violates the band's omertà – once again – and publicly alludes to Ed's health situation. That same month, he does an interview to support an upcoming Las Vegas residency. In it, Roth says, "I'm the face of Van Halen from this point on, most likely. I'm not sure what's happening with Ed, but he's probably not gonna answer the bell this time."

The next month Roth ups the ante and tells another interviewer Van Halen is, for all intents and purposes, finished. "Van Halen is NEVER finish[ed]!!" Ed tells me in response. "He is and was finished A LONG TIME AGO!!"

Perhaps the biggest reveal is that Ed is at least considering a tour featuring Roth, Anthony, and – wait for it – Hagar.

"Maybe we can catch it in time, before both wack jobs lose it completely and get the whole shebang up there," he tells me. "Wolf opens, Roth and Hagar swap every other song, and we squeeze Mike in somewhere!! I just don't think Al's gonna go for it!! But you never know – stranger things have happened!!"

IN MARCH 2020, Covid hits and the world is in lockdown. With too much time on my hands, I wonder more and more about how Ed's doing. I try to text him at least every couple of weeks, and let the seconds between send-and-response eat away at me.

"Doing OK buddy, you??" he responds on March 15, 2020. He sends me a jokey viral video of a street dealer selling toilet paper as if it were contraband. I respond with an "LOL," but there are no laughs left in me. I just can't help but think Ed may not be around to see the end of the pandemic.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON Ed performing with Wolfgang in 2015, on what would be Van Halen's last tour.

CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY IMAGES

I consider calling him, but that just feels too intimate. So I text him and tell him that when he returns to form it'll "make the comeback all the more impressive."

"Hoping so!!" he writes back.

The days drag on. Ed is becoming less and less available. Often texts go unanswered or are met with brief responses and sometimes only emojis.

It's not like him.

There was a time when his texts were so long that I'd simply skim them. There were times when I had to cut him off and tell him I was headed for bed. Now I'd do anything for one of those unwieldy missives of him ragging on Roth or, shit, just chatting about our dogs.

In July, he tells me he's in the hospital for a back operation. I'm thrilled to hear this, thinking no man on his last legs would endure this kind of procedure. On Aug. 11, 2020, we exchange texts, not knowing it would be for the final time.

"Hope the back operation went OK," I say.

Four hours later, he responds. "Excellent!! It was hell but I'm a new guy!!"

Phew.

Two months later, it's early afternoon on an unseasonably warm and sunny fall day, which I'm staring at from my office window. Work is picking up, but it's nowhere near what it was, and I'm nowhere near where I was, either. The pandemic is taking a mental toll. I'm scrolling through Facebook and I see a post that's vague, but seems to indicate something about Eddie Van Halen. As fast as I can, I go to TMZ. The headline hits me like a freight train: "Eddie Van Halen Dead at 65 From Cancer."

I can't even read beyond those eight words. I close the door to my office, collapse on the love seat that only the dogs use, bury my hands in my face, and cry.

I've lost my childhood hero and a gentle soul I came to call a friend.

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE Ed was told the cancer was back, he was helping care for an aging member of his wife Janie's family. It was a tremendously stressful time. Ed knew even the most Herculean efforts wouldn't heal him. And he could easily imagine the roles reversed. "When I go," he told me, "I hope I go quick!! I don't wanna be a burden on anyone!!" [*Cont. on 135*]

BEFORE THE DENTIST KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD

BY MATT SULLIVAN

A big-game hunter with a license to kill. Allegations of infidelity, fraud, and murder. Did this small-town celebrity shoot his wife on safari? Or was he just living the rage-to-riches American nightmare?

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK SMITH

TO CATCH A LEOPARD, THE TROPHY HUNTER MUST TRACK ITS PREY.

LURE THE BIG CAT with wild dogs. With hedgehogs. With a vanishing species of antelope as bait. Slaughter a southern impala, hang it high in the Mutondo trees, then wait. If you are careful and you are quiet, the camouflaged victim will leap up and succumb to the rifle. Experienced game scouts, though, recommend keeping a shotgun in the truck; once that cat is down, you'd best finish her off, before she runs away.

Over the course of a fortnight in the early autumn of 2016, Bianca Rudolph pulled the trigger on all that bait and still managed to execute a zebra. Alas, no leopard. The Zambian government had lifted its ban on leopard and lion stalking for a full season, so that rich tourists like Bianca and her husband, Larry, could freely bring their arsenals from the McMansions of America to Africa. Back in western Pennsylvania, he was a dentist worth at least $5 million from hocking pain-free tooth work on TV; she was a decent shot and a dedicated wife – marriage was hard work, Bianca expressed to friends around the time of the trip, but she wouldn't give up on it. Out here among the tsetse flies, some 80 miles from the nearest town, their love could reload. Just the other night, they'd danced to Tina Turner singing "You're simply the best" on a Bluetooth speaker, loud enough to stir a lion. Larry and one of the couple's two safari guides asked Bianca if she'd like to stay out here in the national park a few extra days, to claim her prize.

"Don't even think about it, boys," Bianca responded, according to later testimony. She and Larry were due back in the States for her nephew's wedding on Saturday. She looked forward to spending time with Italian relatives and their two grown kids. The hunting party initiated protocol to unload their guns, then rumbled back to camp. The Rudolphs would pack for Lusaka at dawn.

By around 5 a.m., the coffee had arrived and the baggage attendant had visited the master suite, a haute log-cabin lean-to with a view. Larry and Bianca weren't ready, not yet. The guides charged their satellite phones in the dining hall, as first light brushed upon the banks of the Kafue River. They were nearly finished logging the vacation's tally of carcasses when they heard, from inside the cabin, a shotgun blast.

Bianca's body lay at the foot of the dresser next to the bathroom. A hole, between six and eight centimeters wide, had macerated her black T-shirt, her bra, the left side of her heart. Larry slumped over Bianca, blood staining the floor beneath her wedding ring and watch. "My wife has committed *suicide*," he cried out, recalls the second guide, a local game scout named Spencer Kakoma, who tried to comfort him. But he was inconsolable. Someone fetched the medical kit. It was too late. "What am I going to tell my *children*?"

ONE LAST HUNT Bianca Rudolph died at the same camp where Larry said a crocodile attacked him.

The scout now claims, according to court testimony and an interview with ROLLING STONE, that Larry indicated he wanted to throw himself in the river. He says that Larry claimed he'd heard the shot from the shower. But the scout remembers seeing that the dentist's shoes were on. That his body was dry. Larry went on to tell the other guide, his longtime hunting mate Mark Swanepoel, that he'd been stuck in the bathroom with what was described as "the shits." On their drive to notify the authorities, Larry and Swanepoel allegedly discussed theories about how maybe Bianca's death wasn't a suicide at all: how her fingernails could have picked at the trigger while packing up the gun. Or how its leather case fit too tightly to zip, perhaps forcing Bianca to slam the butt end of a rare and mistakenly loaded Browning Auto-5 smack-dab onto the floor, the muzzle facing square and tight against her lung.

It was, Larry soon declared, a tragic accident. The local cops agreed and, after accompanying Larry and the corpse to Lusaka, returned his weapon. "They aren't exactly *CSI: Miami*," says Dan Foote, former U.S. ambassador to Zambia.

An intelligence officer from the wildlife authorities arrived on the scene and later shared his observations with fellow investigators: The barrel seemed too long to him for self-infliction. The police had not collected fingerprints. And this American in the golf shirt, his tears dried fast. Under the officer's questioning, he says, Dr. Rudolph, a renowned hunter, would not explain the operation of his own shotgun. What kind of a husband, the agent asked himself, forgets his whereabouts when his wife of 34 years takes a bullet? What kind of a man *was* the American millionaire?

"In his eyes, I couldn't see that softness in him," says the officer, Musuwa Musese. On the phone from Lusaka, he recalls an instant suspicion: "I could see something in him, and I doubted that look. This was no accident."

A DECADE EARLIER, Larry Rudolph had made another trip to the same remote camp in Zambia. A dangerous trip, perhaps. Hard to tell, really, between myth and truth, in what some people from his orbit call Larryworld. But the legend Larry would recount, to anyone who'd listen, begins with a restless safari sunrise. One morning in late October 2006, Larry grabbed his rifle and went fishing alone, downstream on the banks where the crocodiles roam. "I was bringing the fish in," Larry would say in a deposition. "When I reached for it, a crocodile came out and grabbed me and pulled me in, rolled me over." The river, the story goes, exploded.

And that, Larry claims, is how a mighty snarling reptile bit off his thumb.

Or at least the chunk by the nail, before he allegedly said that the croc – Larry's attorneys later referred to it as an alligator – chomped on his jeans and pulled him back in the water. Larry said he escaped onto a rock and fired his gun for help. A medevac pilot showed up, but couldn't take off until Larry let his guide take photographs

COURTESY OF SAKABILO KALEMBWE

MATT SULLIVAN *won a 2022 New York Press Club award for his story about anti-vaxxers in the NBA.*

of the severed finger. He had cuts on his leg and a damaged palm, but the rest of him made it out of Africa unscathed. According to allegations in a later legal filing, Larry seemed "quite relaxed" for having survived a crocodile attack; his jeans appeared damp, not soaked.

A dozen of Larry's former close friends and senior colleagues tell ROLLING STONE they believe, now as then, that he'd been laying track for a payday – that he'd blown his own finger away. Upon Larry's return to the U.S., a fellow hunter and arbitration lawyer named Ron Arendt remembers Larry asking him whether he should claim disability. The lawyer says he wondered why a healthy 51-year-old would have taken out multiple private-insurance policies, or why he'd particularly need the tip of a thumb on his nondominant left hand to hold a mouth mirror.

"He said, 'I'm a frickin' dentist, OK? I can't fuckin' use it anymore, OK?' " recalls Arendt. " 'And I'm making this claim.' "

Larry later said the problem was nerve damage and lasting numbness. Top insurers would investigate, but it was cost-prohibitive to visit big-cat country: Larry would collect at least $3.5 million in the years to come, a legal filing indicates. His attorneys, who declined to answer detailed lists of questions for this story, have argued that Larry's 2006 hunting guide recently changed his previously sworn-to version of events and that they "have so much evidence to show that that was a legitimate, real alligator attack on his thumb."

But shadows of doubt hover over Dr. Rudolph like a canopy above the savanna. "I thought, all along, the thumb was a fraud," Arendt says. "And he was always misrepresenting his hunting experience to turn these delusions of grandeur into political power and money. He is an amoral snake-oil salesman."

A four-month ROLLING STONE investigation – more than 75 interviews, plus a review of thousands of pages of court documents, internal finances, and police files – reveals a portrait of the dentist as a conniving and duplicitous man of our time. Over decades, he has indulged brushes with fame, fortune – and, prosecutors now say, fraudulent behavior, culminating in the death of his wife and the rebirth of a luxurious double life with an alleged partner in crime. One of many employees he had fired over the years likens Larry to *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, and one of several women who claim Larry propositioned them on the job says his smooth talk reminded her of Ted Bundy, without the serial killing. One political operative from a battalion of enemies calls Larry "a wannabe Wayne LaPierre for the clout, with the narcissism of Donald Trump."

Lawrence Patrick Rudolph learned to hunt from his father as a boy in small-town Irwin, Pennsylvania. He shot a deer with a bow and arrow on a road trip with his friend at 18. Larry was handsome – eagle's nose, sculpted cheeks, a cartoon brow – and he came on strong at the University of Pittsburgh's dental school: After getting rejected by one undergrad, he moved on to a well-to-do 22-year-old named Bianca Finizio. They married in 1982. He opened a solo practice in the early 1980s but decided to embrace "the economies of scale" with a one-stop shop. Patients who were afraid of dentists could knock out multiple procedures at once, all while knocked out by anesthesia, and still make it home for dinner. "That," he later said, "was my model."

By 2007, Larry was clearing nearly $30,000 a month in disability, a court paper alleges. Despite being prevented from practicing dentistry on account of the thumb, he made himself what he called "a miniature COO" of a fledgling chain, the Total Dentistry, in multiple locations across greater Pittsburgh. He paid well, and conducted job interviews at semi-expensive restaurants with his very expensive wife; patients and colleagues marveled at Bianca's furs and auburn hair, at her seemingly blind devotion to Larry. She pitched in at the office with insurance claims or paychecks and, once the startup took off, worked as a full-time mom to the couple's two young children.

COLLEGE SWEETHEARTS Bianca and Larry Rudolph (above) met at Pitt, when she was an undergrad and he was in dental school.

ON THE PROWL Larry won the 2007 Weatherby Award, a so-called Nobel Prize of trophy hunting that required big-game carcasses from almost every continent.

ONE POLITICAL OPERATIVE FROM A BATTALION OF ENEMIES CALLS LARRY "A WANNABE WAYNE LAPIERRE, WITH THE NARCISSISM OF DONALD TRUMP."

Meanwhile, Larry's spasms of rage were in the air. Literally: Two former colleagues recall his having chucked a small, tooth-shaped mirror so hard across the length of a hallway that it stuck in a wall, and stayed there for days. A senior staffer says Larry threw a syringe-like instrument at her, and other employees allege that would become a pattern; his attorneys have said no official complaint of such behavior was ever filed. At a meeting in late 2007, Larry chewed out employees for what his legal team at the time called "dismay at the declining professional standards" of Total Dentistry's branch in suburban Green Tree. He asked for patient records to provide his own diagnoses and treatment plans, Larry's lawyers wrote, and he wanted nonprofessional conduct reported directly to him for "remedial action."

Larry's partners, finding little use for a belligerent ex-dentist, attempted to force him out. He sued for damages and defamation, but they confronted him at his lawyers' office, two people familiar with the situation recall. A lot of cash had been moved around, they claimed – or gone missing. One of the partners, Dr. Tim Runco, says they gave Larry an ultimatum: "Walk away, or we're gonna press charges." Larry denied the embezzlement accusation, kicked them out of the room, and they soon settled.

But Larry did not just walk away. He prepared to launch an empire of his own: Three Rivers Dental Group, with the first location 500 feet from his rivals. "He's vindictive and vengeful," Runco says. "But he's a charmer, and he's a good businessman." Larry and Bianca pumped their wealth into travel, with and without each other, and bought up real estate in Arizona, where their daughter, Anabianca, was taking college classes. In 2011, according to property records, the Rudolphs secured what Larry called a deal for $1.7 million on a 7,000-square-foot mansion outside Scottsdale, big even for an enclave with spreads for Alicia Keys, Stevie Nicks, and the retired chairman of Walmart. The town was called Paradise Valley.

LARRY RUDOLPH/FACEBOOK, 2

ELEVEN HOURS after Bianca's death on Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2016, Larry called the U.S. embassy in Lusaka, according to a summary from the authorities, and asked how to cremate his wife. The diplomat on the other end of the line began to feel uncomfortable that police work and postmortems were moving so quickly, he would tell investigators, so two days later he traveled to a funeral home and photographed the cadaver himself. Larry rang him up, "livid" over an invasion of privacy, the diplomat would recount. But the diplomat had been a longtime Marine, and he came to inform the investigators that the entrance wound on Bianca's body made him believe she hadn't been shot at such close range.

THE COMPANION Lori Milliron started working as a part-time hygienist for Rudolph in 2002. They soon traveled the world and expanded a dental empire.

DOCTOR FEELGOOD Rudolph made a fortune offering dental work performed under heavy anesthesia. His practice's motto was "No sights, no sounds, and no fears!"

LARRY FOOLED AROUND, FORMER FRIENDS SAY, LIKE HE HUNTED BIG GAME: FOR SPORT AT FIRST, THEN, AS HE BECAME A MINOR CELEBRITY, AS A POWER TRIP.

On Friday morning, waiting with Larry for paperwork at the crematorium, the diplomat offered to tell Larry's kids the bad news. Larry preferred to let them know in person. But the diplomat told investigators that he pushed and – though Larry's attorneys have denied this recounting – that the widower shooed him away, claiming they were his children from a previous marriage he never had.

Hours later in Pittsburgh, a close colleague found 30-year-old Anabianca pacing around a dental conference in a panic: "My mom's not answering her phone," the colleague remembers her saying. Ana's younger brother, Julian, hadn't been able to find their parents either.

By all accounts, Ana worshipped her father. After receiving her dental license in 2015, she joined the family business, and employees watched as Larry helped her complete procedures when he'd fly back from Arizona. It had taken a week for Ana to find out about her mother's demise, according to the close colleague, who says Larry was slippery on details. The colleague also says Ana told her that she asked around why anyone would put a Catholic in an urn without a proper mass, or at least a goodbye. It was in the will, Larry's lawyers have since suggested.

His daughter was inclined to believe him, friends acknowledge, because they say she was inclined to believe nearly anything he told her – especially when it came to a former dental hygienist named Lori Milliron, who'd become her father's sidekick and maybe more than that. Maybe a lot more. Soon after Ana began working at her father's practice, co-workers remember her asking why Lori was always shadowing her dad into the back office. Earlier in 2016, the close colleague recalls letting slip that Larry and Lori had vacationed together in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, and Ana refusing to believe her. The colleague says that Ana told her she finally asked her father, straight up, if he'd been having a relationship with Lori – and that Larry said no.

Larry bought Lori Milliron a flight from Pittsburgh to Phoenix on or about the day of the funeral, an affidavit alleges, but the reservation was immediately canceled. The next day, the former dental hygienist got her ticket to Paradise Valley after all. Larry and Lori weren't looking over their shoulders, not yet. So the longtime lovers sat there in a relative silence, watching their man, Donald Trump, win the election.

LARRY FOOLED AROUND, longtime former friends and co-workers say, like he hunted big game: for sport at first, and, as he became a minor celebrity in the incestuous world of the gun, as a power trip. One senior colleague from the 1990s remembers asking why he was unfaithful to his wife and Larry responding that it was as fun as the roller coaster over at the Kennywood theme park. When they asked how Larry would feel if Bianca was fooling around on him, too, the colleague recalls him laughing it off.

By the early 2000s, according to two family friends and an allegation in a court transcript, Larry told them that Bianca had confronted him – she was thinking about divorce. One of the family friends remembers a teary-eyed Larry blaming his own indiscretions: "He said, 'I fucked up. Bianca is seeing somebody else, and it's all my fault.'" Larry lost weight and began to take Bianca out on the town. "I have to woo her, because nobody is taking half my money," the other family friend recalls Larry saying. There was allegedly a post-nup, but Bianca chose to stay.

Former co-workers say Larry told them he considered his to be an open marriage because of Bianca's alleged dalliance. Larry was also determined to win the Weatherby Award, a so-called Nobel Prize of trophy hunting that required carcasses from almost every continent – ethics and integrity counted for 15 percent – and so he sought out a new traveling companion. "Me and Bianca do our own thing" is how Lori remembers him explaining it away.

"She started it," Lori says, chuckling, in an interview with ROLLING STONE.

When Lori took a second hygienist job at Total Dentistry in May 2002, she was a 44-year-old single mom with three kids who drove some 60 miles each way to Green Tree. Larry kept the affair quiet at Total Dentistry and, after Lori vouched for him in the legal battle against his former business partners, at his own practice. She claims to have never met Bianca – no confrontation nor office run-in. Yet from 2003 to 2008, Larry flew together with Lori some 60 days each year, from Africa to Paris to New Zealand. There is another legend from around 2006, the year of the thumb: Larry and Lori had been in their Ethiopian chalet after a long day on the hunt, when Larry is said to have asked if she would run away with him. Later, Lori would ask if he was going to leave Bianca; the story goes that Larry would joke about how she'd had her chance: "You didn't love me enough to leave."

In July 2009, having won his animal-killing award after a six-year globe-trot with his hygienist turned girlfriend, Larry was elected president of Safari Club International, an organization he and his wife had helped to lead locally for more than two decades. Safari Club is to conservation and trophy hunting what the NRA is to the persistence of the second amendment and school shootings, which is to say an after-school activity for rich white men in tuxedos to extract dues from membership and servitude from Washington. Heretofore known in public mostly to Pennsylvania geriatrics watching ads on late-night cable television or between innings of a Pirates

TOP: COURTESY OF LORI MILLIRON

game, the strip-mall dentist set out to fly for an audience with the queen of American conservatism herself, Sarah Palin.

Lori, a Palin fan, was impressed by Larry's pull; during their selfie moment at the governor's office, Lori says Palin admired her jeans. For a fishing fundraiser over the rest of their Alaskan weekend, the Safari Club president had signed up his girlfriend as an administrative assistant and medical aide, due to Larry's congenital heart condition. They shared a cabin, and Lori hooked a 40-pound salmon. But former Safari Club officials admit they gossiped about a photo from the trip of Lori, blond and beaming with fish in hand.

"shove it up your ass, and empty the clip." Larry and Bianca claimed in court testimony that it was Babaz who made this "mortal threat," but Babaz recalls making fun of Larry for it – .45s have magazines, not clips. And that, he and his friend claim, is what set Larry off: "I will kill your children," Larry told Babaz, according to Babaz, Bishop, and allegations in a Safari Club inquiry. "I will kill your whole family." Larry denied saying this and disputed the inquiry's findings. In any case, Bianca called Babaz "a fucking asshole" and walked away with her husband.

Babaz maintains that Larry and Lori lied under oath about the incident. "Everyone knew he moved," Lori recalls. "Him and Bianca kind of moved on."

Larry did pull up in his old red truck every now and then, mostly to drop off Lori from work. Larry and Lori were business associates and friends without benefits, as she describes it, save the occasional vacation or their annual trip to Cabo. "We were like an old married couple," she says, cracking herself up. "We may have thought about it, but we were too exhausted to do it."

When Larry pulled up to the office in the morning, he regularly carried a Styrofoam coffee cup spiked with Jameson, six former employees recall, and staffers got sick of his agitated

THE AMBASSADOR WORRIED ABOUT A CASE BUILT ON LIFE INSURANCE AND A LOVE TRIANGLE, ABOUT A MYSTERY IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. "WELL, F---, IT'S KINDA LATE. ARE YOU GUYS GONNA BE ABLE TO PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER?"

For her part, Bianca helped to organize a private gala behind the scenes at Safari Club's annual convention in 2011. Palin was the star of the show. Onstage at the main event, Larry introduced her as "one of us"; members of the crowd of 2,500 watched as he reached out for a hug, though some recall Palin ducking him with a death-panel glare. The image of Larry that two attendees cannot shake from that weekend, however, is their president strutting the floor with a member of the Romanian chapter. Larry has admitted to sitting with the woman at dinner, but denied anything more happened. "I wouldn't do it," Larry says in a video he surreptitiously recorded over a meal with another club executive, seeking to clear his name. "This is the shit they pinned on me."

In April 2011, Larry was introduced to a woman by a Safari Club official and confidant named Paul Babaz and began to text her: "u need some attention and lots of sex" . . . "How can you resist this!!!" When the woman asked Larry about the status of his marriage, he texted back that his having two houses kept his affairs discreet. Larry would later acknowledge having dinner and drinks with the woman, followed by "a goodbye kiss" in a parking lot. The organization's establishment worried about a Clinton-esque stain on the brand, and once the 2012 convention rolled into Vegas, Bianca got word that her husband was having a long-term affair – and that Bianca had been called "a long-suffering wife." Bianca was insulted. She was angry. Larry blamed Babaz for the gossip, but a friend drinking with them at the Mandalay Bay remembered her insisting to Larry that if the rumors weren't true, then he should calm down. After multiple cocktails, Larry found Babaz in a hallway, asking why he'd messed with his marriage.

Babaz's guest, Clint Bishop, says he approached to de-escalate the fight when he overheard Larry tell Babaz he'd take a .45 pistol,

he was running around on her, and she still stood by him," he says. "It's really sad." At a Safari Club executive meeting that May, Larry was blindsided by a public inquiry into his women, his travel, and his expenses. His awards were to be taken away, his name erased from the record books. Larry resigned that August. "He has had none of the privileges of membership or of a past president since that time," Safari Club CEO W. Laird Hamberlin tells ROLLING STONE.

With Larry's political career in tatters, he thought about becoming a Fox News contributor on animal conservation. He also took Safari Club to court for defamation and breach of contract. Larry managed to retain his beloved Weatherby Award and, before scoring a win and a settlement, Bianca defended him.

According to a deposition transcript, she spoke of the "devastating" effects of having to justify her marriage to fading friends, all because Safari Club's old guard found an excuse to remove her husband from power over a kiss with some woman in a parking lot. An attorney for the organization asked if she thought Larry had ever had a sexual relationship with that woman – or with Lori Milliron, or anyone else, for that matter – and Bianca, under oath, said no. It depends, she pushed back, on what your meaning of "affair" is.

"I was not a long-suffering wife," she said. "I've never been a long-suffering wife. My husband and I have been married for . . . 30-some years. Happily married."

LORI WAS LONELY and less than lavish in the summer of 2015, living out of a three-story condo on a cul-de-sac in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, at the end of Wild Turkey Drive. Larry subsidized her rent and helped with college tuition for her daughter, but Larry and Bianca were spending most of their time at the new place in Paradise Valley. "I didn't even know

emails at lunchtime. One afternoon that summer, a contractor named Amos Damian was sterilizing instruments when he remembers Larry approaching him: "Hey, do you have any cousins or amigos in Mexico that can come up here and make somebody disappear?" Damian says he replied that he was from Las Vegas, but, no, he was not familiar with any assassins. Damian claims, in an interview with ROLLING STONE and to investigators, that Larry asked if he was sure, and proceeded to float a $25,000 commission.

Another former co-worker alleges that, when he'd refused to approve a root canal three years earlier, Larry had drunk-dialed him, slurring, "One of these days, you're gonna walk out of your house, and a Nigerian's gonna shoot you in your fucking face!"

Without denying the hitman-threat allegations, about which a federal agent has testified, Larry's attorneys have argued that "having a temper at work or words with an employee over six years ago does not make one dangerous" and that such incidents are "hearsay complaints of disgruntled employees."

Another afternoon during that long summer of 2015, Lori threw some tools in the car and picked up a bottle of wine. She figured she'd help a new office manager who'd moved to town, Anna Grimley, put together a dresser at her rental nearby. Lori was good with the instructions – on that much they can agree.

According to Grimley's account, Lori proceeded to explain that she and Larry's original plan *had* been simple: "He said at one point that they were supposed to take all the money and leave," Grimley tells ROLLING STONE. "The purpose of the cash was to just disappear. But that didn't happen. So that's when the ultimatum came: 'You have one year to get rid of her.' "

Lori has strongly disputed this, through her lawyer, an affidavit, in court [*Cont. on 134*]

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Reviews

Music

MAGGIE ROGERS' NEW FREEDOM

A pop-music prodigy delivers her complicated second album

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Maggie Rogers
Surrender
CAPITOL
★★★½☆

THE STARK cover of Maggie Rogers' second album makes a statement: Gone are the twilight hues and soft focus of her 2019 debut, *Heard It in a Past Life,* and their suggestion of a young artist working her way through her own thrilling ascendance. That album capped off a several-year process of Rogers' coronation as the Next Big Thing, earning her arena slots opening for Kacey Musgraves and a Best New Artist Grammy nomination. The zoomed-in black-and-white photo on the cover of *Surrender* lets us know that her swift coronation has now led to a more complicated reality.

It also suggests an artist who's in it for the long haul: "You tell me you want →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Jody Hewgill

MAGGIE ROGERS

everything, you want it fast," Rogers sings on "Anywhere With You," the record's cathartic centerpiece. The narrator and their partner are desperate for a quick fix, to flee their problems and escape town, go joyriding anywhere, even I-95. But Rogers has a response: "All I ever wanted is to make something fucking last."

Rogers' debut was a showcase for her eclectic, prodigious ambition; she's someone who can command banjo-strummed roots music, streaming-friendly synth-pop, and anthemic arena rock. *Surrender* feels less hungry to impress. It seems to reflect what the 28-year-old singer-songwriter is most interested in at this very moment, which appears to be a blend of Nineties alt-rock and turn-of-the-century shopping-mall pop. A few of the endless array of touchstones: "Criminal"-era Fiona Apple; iPod-era U2; early-2000s Pink; and most of all, Alanis Morissette, whose *Jagged Little Pill* seems like a primary reference point.

Rogers (a former aspiring music critic and recent divinity-school graduate) self-consciously dabbles in several tropes that are often native to second albums by hyped artists: restlessness with semi-stardom ("Honey"); nostalgia for a carefree adolescence ("Shatter"); anxiety about no longer feeling grounded ("Symphony"); a desire to escape responsibility ("Horses"). The insistence that she's a career artist here to stay might be the most convincing.

It's no surprise that on an album about seeking escape, Rogers has turned toward the sounds and comforts of her youth. On "Be Cool," she daydreams about spending just one night listening to Britney Spears with old pals. On the very next song, "Shatter," she conjures *Fearless*-era Taylor Swift: "We're going back/To being 16, flying like you'll never collapse."

Then there's "Begging for Rain," on which Rogers channels Bonnie Raitt's version of John Prine's classic song "Angel From Montgomery": "You work all day to find religion/And end up standing in your kitchen." Rogers sounds a bit fed up and even more tired, as she "keep[s] waiting" on a thunderstorm to finally provide some respite. But if Maggie Rogers tells us anything on *Surrender,* it's that she's in no rush to get wherever her talent takes her. Ⓡ

COUNTRY'S GROWN-UP BRO

Luke Combs nudges Nashville clichés in the right direction on his third album By MAURA K. JOHNSTON

Luke Combs
Growin' Up
Sony Nashville
★★★½☆

LUKE COMBS wants you to know one thing: He's a regular guy. He might be playing songs that immediately become playlist staples, but those ballads and rockers are, he maintains, the same ones he'd be playing if he were only outfitted with, as he croons on the opening track of his third album, *Growin' Up,* "tips in a jar, my guitar, and an old barstool." The 32-year-old North Carolinian, reigning Country Music Entertainer of the Year, stadium headliner, and holder of multiple platinum records, is trying hard to not be starstruck by his own success. Mostly, it works.

While similar claims of humility from megastars can come off as a bit far-fetched, the dozen songs on *Growin' Up* bear out the just-from-the-heart assertions that appear on the slow-burning "Doin' This." Combs adds just enough modern-day brawn to Nashville songwriting ideals to make the LP an enjoyable, and at times moving, spin through his world of small-town bars and big-hearted people.

On *Growin' Up,* these classic country topics are elevated by Combs' vocals. His robust, rough-edged tenor adds a warmth to his nostalgia-drenched songs, like the road-not-taken chronicle "Used to Wish I Was," as well as the references to the songs and artists he loves, like Garth Brooks and George Jones.

"Any Given Friday Night," which in lesser hands would be a run-of-the-mill bro-country ode to small-town weekend bacchanalia, gets its power from Combs' obvious affection for those who pregame in DQ parking lots in "pick a map dot town[s]," as well as grime-caked guitars that hint at the messiness awaiting those revelers in the later hours. Those riffs are part of *Growin' Up*'s sonic maturity; its spacious production, helmed by Combs alongside co-producers Chip Matthews and Jonathan Singleton, allows guitar licks and thumping bass lines to tug songs in sometimes surprising directions.

"The Kind of Love We Make," a gently urgent come-on to a woman who's been too stressed-out to let loose in the bedroom, is a country revamp of midtempo Nineties alt-adult cuts like Semisonic's "Secret Smile"; the rave-up "Ain't Far From It" depicts one of the dates that could eventually lead to those moments of committed bliss, with Combs' flirtations egged on by honky-tonk pianos and saucy licks.

Combs isn't reinventing Nashville's four-wheel clichés on *Growin' Up*; he's merely giving it a fresh coat of wax and removing the more ostentatious add-ons. But his detail-rich songs make *Growin' Up* a big-time country album with a tip-jar-worthy intimacy. Ⓡ

FROM TOP: JEREMY COWART; IMAGINE IT MEDIA

BREAKING

Trueno's Brave New Old-School Rap

ARGENTINE RAPPER Trueno is just 20, but he's already realizing his potential as one of South American hip-hop's most compelling new voices. Songs like "Hoop Hoop" and "Fuck el Police," from his excellent second album, *Bien o Mal,* are steeped in old-school American hip-hop. Splitting the 13 tracks between two sides, "The Bad" and "The Good," Trueno raps about dictatorships, economic hardships, crime, and inequality, while urging people to rise and stand together. He says he wanted to turn "the idea of protesting into a celebration," and that's exactly what he does. The result is one of the year's sharpest breakout releases. **JULYSSA LOPEZ**

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

Paige
"Forever"
PierreTheChosen

REVIEWS

BIGGER THAN THE NINETIES

Two indie-pop artists expand their sounds on great new albums

WHEN SOCCER Mommy broke out of her Nashville bedroom with her 2018 debut, *Clean*, she was a leader in the Liz Phair-loving Nineties-rock revival. Now, on her third album, she's still a master of that sound ("Shotgun" is dream-pop perfection). But there's a more multifaceted angst here, too, especially on glitchy, grueling tunes like "Unholy Affliction" and "Darkness Forever." The musical and emotional shadow play on the album makes the mind-clearing grandeur of moments like "Feel It All the Time" seem more earned.

Soccer Mommy
Sometimes, Forever
★★★★☆

Beabadoobee
Beatopia
★★★★☆

Beatrice Laus (the London artist who records as Beabadoobee) spends most of her second album in the sunshine – from an acoustic pleasantry like "Ripples" to the bossa-nova-touched "The Perfect Pair" to the dappled jangle of "Pictures of Us." She rocks on "Talk," which starts out sounding like Madchester in 1989 and turns into offhandedly trenchant power pop an Olivia Rodrigo fan could get down with: "We go together like the gum on my shoes," she sings to some poor sucker, showing she's as good with sick burns as she is with plush tunes. **JON DOLAN**

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

Hercules and Love Affair
In Amber
BMG

TOUGH LOVE House-music revivalist Andy Butler leaves smooth grooves behind for a bracing, at times beautiful, LP of dark art-pop abstraction, featuring heart-ripping vocals from brilliant avant-diva ANOHNI.

★★★½☆

Regina Spektor
Home, Before and After
Warner

PIANO POET The New York-based singer-songwriter has been killing it for years as a Joni Mitchell or Tori Amos for the Lower East Side, and this incisive, empathetic collection is among her strongest.

★★★½☆

Amanda Shires
Take It Like a Man
ATO

BIG COUNTRY One of Nashville's most-gifted singer-songwriters continues to expand her folk-based sound, mixing Radiohead-style atmospherics, Seventies pop melodies, and even a splash of soul.

★★★½☆

Tedeschi Trucks Band
I Am the Moon
Fantasy

LONG HAUL This ambitious rock band is spreading its new 24-song release over a series of mini LPs, each worth your while; they make Southern-rock and classic-rock history seem present in our time.

★★★½☆

Tove Styrke
Hard
Sony

SWEET SWEDE The fourth album from this Swedish pop singer delivers Robyn-style dance-pop confessionals that can be intense ("Hardcore"), tender ("Show Me Love"), and clever ("Millennial Blues").

★★★½☆

070 Shake
You Can't Kill Me
G.O.O.D. Music/Def Jam

DEEP SHAKE Danielle Balbuena makes moody R&B that's been compared to Pink Floyd (by us). Here, she stretches out further, with elegiac bangers that are all about slo-mo self-discovery.

★★★½☆

Jack White
Entering Heaven Alive
Third Man

LAID-BACK JACK White's second album of the year is a mostly acoustic set that reins in some of the zanier impulses of his recent work to make one of his more enjoyable LPs in a while.

★★★½☆

Superorganism
World Wide Pop
Domino

TOO-HYPER POP Psychedelic indie-pop crew Superorganism had a great hit a few years back with "Something for Your M.I.N.D." This fire hose of arch-pop cleverness will overload even the sharpest mind.

★★★☆☆

Dawes
Misadventures of a Doomscroller
Rounder

SLIGHT SUNSHINE The mutable roots band channels Jackson Browne and the Dead, with lots of genteel guitars and light alienation — if only the lyrics were as articulate as the melodies and playing.

★★★☆☆

black midi
Hellfire
Rough Trade

BLACK SHITTY Once a very cool post-punk band, London's black midi take a serious detour into pretentious overreach here. The worst bit sounds like Pere Ubu doing ironic nightclub jazz.

★★½☆☆

CONTRIBUTORS: DAVID BROWNE, JON DOLAN, JON FREEMAN

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: FILMMAGIC; ANDREW BENGE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTOPHER POLK FOR VARIETY; ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

SUMMER

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RollingStone GUIDE

Kendrick Lamar

The greatest rapper of his generation – from mixtapes to masterworks

By WILL DUKES

WHEN KENDRICK Lamar came on the scene in 2003, the world wasn't ready for his precocious genius. Mixing hard-knocks Compton sensibilities with a sophisticated worldview (which made him seem wiser than his 16 years), K.Dot blew us away with surgical precision. And as his stardom has grown, he's only kept upping his iconic game.

Must-Haves

good kid, m.A.A.d city
2012

This Dr. Dre-endorsed landmark introduced the general public to the otherworldly talents of the young genius from Compton. Blessed with a distinctively high-pitched vocal tone — he sounds like a Martian who spent his formative years somewhere on Rosecrans Avenue — Kendrick gave us a brilliant panoramic view of Black life in Los Angeles. The humid "m.A.A.d city," with its wounded reminiscences of routine violence, is like the auditory equivalent to a stress pillow: It's an apt outlet for Kendrick's righteous rage, making PTSD palatable for the mainstream. This is where Kendrick turned his hardscrabble journey into a high-charting yet uncompromising work of art.

To Pimp a Butterfly
2015

To Pimp a Butterfly is a masterpiece with a title that invokes a Harper Lee novel and an effulgent vibe that recalls the meticulously crafted viscera of a Romare Bearden collage. It's as if the richness of the post-civil-rights era is filtered through the bugged-out lens of a budding auteur raised on the early-Nineties regulars from L.A.'s seminal Good Life cafe. The beauty of Kendrick's art on cuts like "For Free? (Interlude)" is that it seamlessly marries methodology and passion. "Alright" would define a generation's seething yet joyful protest; "How Much a Dollar Cost" is an all-too-human parable about how karma manifests itself every day; and "Momma," inspired by Kendrick's 2014 trip to South Africa, is a dreamy ode to the continent where life originated.

DAMN.
2017

Kendrick's third major-label album is like a Coen Brothers film with a dark-hearted punchline straight out of the Old Testament. "Duckworth" is all ecclesiastical gravity, a weighty allegory finding cynical redemption in the thought that humans can't change the generally crummy circumstances that were already predestined — by some watchful if capricious God — to change in an instant because of some random and fortuitous encounter. The blistering "XXX" is a mournful riff on the parable of Job that also tackles gun control while condemning America's original sins of genocide and slavery. *DAMN.* assures us, with grace and not a little gallows humor, that we're all essentially doomed.

Further Listening

Section.80
2011

On *Section.80* — his official debut album and first release for Top Dawg Entertainment — Kendrick Lamar seemed to cram his entire worldview into 16 songs that masterfully covered everything from his generation's predilection for distraction and hyperactivity to the quiet moments of joy in the workaday grind to his open admiration for the natural beauty of Black women. "Fuck Your Ethnicity" is rife with pointed observations ("My details be retail, man, I got so much in store") that proved he was destined to be one of rap's true all-time greats.

untitled unmastered
2016

Untitled unmastered looms like a haunting hangover to its predecessor, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. With its free-jazz ambiance and brainy, concept-heavy themes, Lamar's short, bracing 2016 outtakes collection represents a top-tier encapsulation of abstract Black cool. The opening track, "Untitled 01," is all beautiful bedlam, with K.Dot laying down a "sky is falling" revelation ("Ocean water dried out, fire burning more tides out/Tabernacle and city capital turned inside out") over a thundering bass. It sets the tone for a record that proves King Kendrick's leftovers are better than most artists' career pinnacles.

Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers
2022

Kendrick's fifth studio album and his first in the five years since *DAMN.*, the enormously anticipated *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers* sports a mock-heroic title that sounds like a hit Broadway musical. Fittingly, there's more than enough drama on this 18-track, 73-minute opus of self-discovery and interrogation. He pulls no punches, addressing a trans family member's perseverance — despite rampant homophobia — on the majestic "Auntie Diaries," which is one of his most personal and heartfelt songs. And "We Cry Together" is a brutally honest and sometimes humorous examination of his own latent misogyny.

C FLANIGAN/GETTY IMAGES

Going Deeper

Y.H.N.I.C. Hub City Threat: Minor of the Year

2003

Kendrick hit the scene in 2003 with his inaugural mixtape, boasting a polished flow that felt especially authentic during an era typified by generic freestyles. On "Intro (Hova Song)," K.Dot references Creflo Dollar and the Rodney King riots in a confident cadence that makes him sound worldlier and wiser than his adolescent peers. It was already evident that Kendrick was the future.

Training Day

2005

On *Training Day,* Lamar, at only age 18, sounds as if he's already put in his 10,000 hours. On "One Shot Kill," he effortlessly floats over instrumentals — with a lithe, hair-trigger flow — whose swift BPMs are not even remotely in the wheelhouse of his contemporaries. On "Good Morning America," Kendrick name-checks Snoop and Tupac, while bragging that he's the West Coast's new savior.

No Sleep Til NYC

2007

No Sleep Til NYC is a fun and lyrically dense homage to hip-hop's golden era, solidifying Kendrick's bona fides as a legit student of the game.

The future Good Kid teams up with Black Hippy's Jay Rock for his third mixtape — brimming with wicked freestyles over beats from timeless NYC staples. On "The Show," Kendrick casually confesses he wants to "live like a silver-spoon Caucasian." Go figure: He'd soon be regarded as hip-hop royalty.

Kendrick Lamar EP

2009

With soulful, state-of-the-art production, this brief project flaunted a mix of high-vibrational affirmations and sober street chronicles summed up in a line on the worldly "Wanna Be Heard," on which Kendrick boasts, "I'm a close cut to Common and Gucci Mane." And "Uncle Bobby & Jason Keaton" pays tribute to an incarcerated homie with gut-wrenching grace.

C4

2009

With a co-sign from Lil Wayne, Kendrick dropped this mixtape filled with fire verses over the instrumentals from Wayne's *Tha Carter III.* On "Best Rapper Under 25," Kendrick spits, "Tell my momma don't feel sorrow, 'cause her son was a gunner/They found my corpse with a rapper's head in my stomach." Meanwhile, on "Mr. Carter 2," he refers to himself as the "God MC," making it clear that, with *C4,* he was ready to blow.

Overly Dedicated

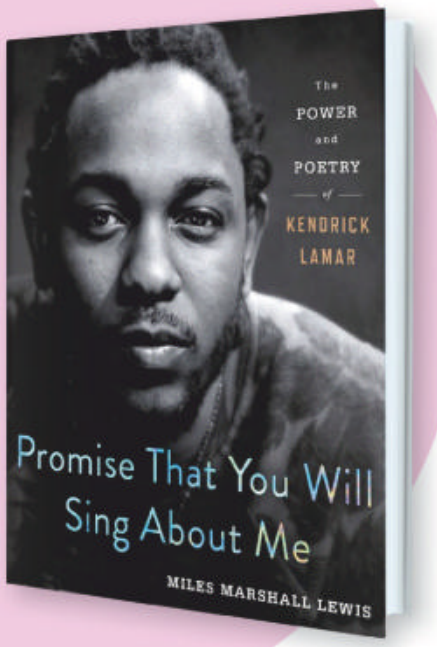
2010

Kendrick pivoted toward the mainstream with *Overly Dedicated,* his most impressive mixtape before his world-conquering breakout. "R.O.T.C. (Interlude)" is a crystalline confessional that brims with big, award-winning, indie-flick energy. And there hasn't been a more populist ode to being left of center than the stellar, Schoolboy Q-assisted "Michael Jordan."

FURTHER READING

***Promise That You Will Sing About Me* By Miles Marshall Lewis**

Veteran journalist Miles Marshall Lewis explores Lamar's rise from his humble origins on the early-aughts-mixtape grind to rap luminary and Pulitzer Prize winner. Lewis profiled Lamar during his stint as arts and culture editor for *Ebony,* and each chapter is informed by Lewis' expert analysis and engrossing personal anecdotes.



Killer Kenny

More gems from Lamar's stellar career

"BURIED ALIVE INTERLUDE"

***Drake feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2011**

On "Buried Alive Interlude," a breakout moment on Drake's blockbuster *Take Care,* Kendrick details such a haunting portrait of fame, Drake let K.Dot have it all to himself.

"NOSETALGIA"

***Pusha T feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2013**

The angst in Kendrick's tone on this blistering banger tells a harrowing story about the havoc the crack era wreaked.

"FREEDOM"

***Beyoncé feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2016**

Kendrick made Beyoncé's plea for equality an even more urgent anthem, bottling everyone's fury over the seemingly endless spate of police killings of unarmed African Americans.

"CONRAD TOKYO"

***A Tribe Called Quest feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2016**

A Tribe Called Quest's farewell album, *We Got It From Here… Thank You 4 Your Service,* feels even more compelling thanks to a fiery Kendrick verse about the doom-filled Trump years.

"DOVES IN THE WIND"

On this chill SZA single, Kung Fu Kenny gives a whole exegesis on pussy power, from the enlightened male's perspective.

"YEAH RIGHT"

***Vince Staples feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2017**

Kendrick shows up on this sleeper with a quick-fire verse that demonstrates he's prepared to "pop 'til the wrist pop."

"POWER"

***Rapsody feat. Kendrick Lamar and Lance Skiiiwalker,* 2017**

Harnessing godlike intensity, Kendrick anointed Rapsody's "Power" with a verse that spans the cosmos, addressing universal law and celebrity culture.

"TINTS"

***Anderson .Paak feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2018**

On this groovy, road-movie-esque single, K.Dot holds court with some breezy couplets that place him firmly in the driver's seat.

"ALL THE STARS"

***Kendrick Lamar and SZA,* 2018**

On this hit from the Kendrick-produced *Black Panther* soundtrack, he spits an ethereal verse about the downsides of fame, demonstrating why he continues to wear the crown.

"LOOK OVER YOUR SHOULDER"

***Busta Rhymes feat. Kendrick Lamar,* 2020**

Verbal gymnastics sound as catchy as a Tin Pan Alley staple on Kendrick's showstopping verse from this Busta Rhymes scorcher.

"FAMILY TIES"

***Baby Keem and Kendrick Lamar,* 2021**

On his cousin Baby Keem's brassy uptempo hit, Kendrick supplies some unforgettable couplets — about avoiding the pandemic — that loom like triumphant fight music.

Check out Rolling Stone .com for more Lamar reviews and features.

Heavy lies the crown: Lamar in 2017

RENELL MEDRANO

ESSAY

Is Netflix Still Worth a Damn?

The streaming giant used to be a viewer's best friend. Now, it seems content to give us the finger

By ALAN SEPINWALL

IF NETFLIX WASN'T the only streaming video service of the 2010s, it often felt as if it was. It had a remarkable library of classic TV shows that at one point included *The Office, Friends,* and *Lost,* to name a few. Beginning in 2013 with *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black,* and continuing through *Daredevil, Stranger Things,* and more, it had a wave of original series that viewers couldn't stop talking about. And its method of releasing every episode of a new season at once transformed the very way we all consumed and talked about television. While other streamers like Hulu and Amazon Prime Video struggled to keep up, Netflix just kept spending, apparently determined to destroy as much of the competition as possible while convincing viewers they would never need another source for TV and movies.

The plan worked – sort of. The volume of Netflix's output encouraged millions of consumers to cut the cable cord and stick with a handful of streamers, burning traditional broadcast and cable ratings almost down to ash. But where Netflix should feel triumphant as the 10th anniversary of the *Cards* premiere approaches next year, instead it's playing defense. Sure, its subscriber base still vastly outnumbers any of its competitors, but it's a tech company whose business model is predicated on constant growth, and that growth of late has slowed to a crawl. In some markets, it's even gone down, which has sent the value of Netflix's stock plummeting. (The price dropped 35 percent on one day alone in mid-April.) The service that once prided itself on providing a clean, ad-free alternative to traditional television is now planning a lower-priced, ad-supported subscription tier later this year to stop the bleeding.

How did a company that once wiped Blockbuster off the map with its maverick ingenuity become another potential business-school cautionary tale? It's the shows, stupid.

While Netflix had a huge head start on the competition, the rest of the industry was not blind to what was happening throughout the 2010s. Every other conglomerate quickly understood both that streaming was the future and that they had to beef up their own digital platforms right away. As Netflix's library deals lapsed, those titles went back home: *Friends* to HBO Max, *The Office* to Peacock, and so on.

And if Netflix's competitors couldn't compete in quantity of original programming, they could in quality. Netflix has made a few masterpieces over the past decade – see our list at right – but for the most part, its executives seemed to aim for shows that were just good enough. The suits trusted that the superior caliber of their user interface, the power of their recommendation algorithm, and a heavy emphasis on serialization and cliffhangers would make people want to keep watching more and more Netflix, no matter what.

But that approach has proved to be unsustainable now that customers have so many

ILLUSTRATION BY **Matt Harrison Clough**

other options. Netflix finally won a couple of major Emmys last year, for *The Crown* and *The Queen's Gambit,* and still manages the odd breakout hit, like *Bridgerton* or *Squid Game*. More often than not, though, the shows people are talking about these days come from non-Netflix sources, like *The Mandalorian* on Disney+, *Ted Lasso* on Apple TV+, or *The Flight Attendant* on HBO Max.

Not coincidentally, all of those shows are either released on a traditional one-episode-per-week schedule or some kind of hybrid model that's still well short of Netflix's binge-release approach. Where binges once felt exciting, there's now so much television that it can feel like homework to have an entire season dumped on you on a Friday. The binge model has also encouraged the worst instincts in many Netflix creators, who too often refer to their shows as "a 10-hour movie." This is meant to sound prestigious, but it mostly turns a season into an amorphous bag of plot with an inescapable sense that things have been dragging on for much too long.

Netflix's early image was as a friend to the viewer, rescuing shows canceled by other networks. It seemed to have an unspoken agreement with audiences that series would be allowed to run as long as creators wanted – or, at least, that creators would be given ample warning if they had to write a finale. Those days are long gone. Now, the Netflix algorithm has determined that all but the most popular shows are better off ending within two to three seasons, because viewers would rather have constantly new viewing options than keep watching their favorites for years on end. And in many cases, shows like the charming women's pro-wrestling dramedy *GLOW* have been abruptly canceled without any kind of storytelling closure for their audiences.

A big part of the problem is that so many Netflix originals lately seem to have been developed solely to satisfy the "if you liked that, you'll enjoy this" aspect of the algorithm, and come across as pale imitations of the real thing. *Ozark* clearly scratched an itch for viewers who missed *Breaking Bad*, *Justified,* and the like, but even its fans seemed more excited for the *type* of show it was than for *Ozark* itself.

All along, there's been a complacent and at times arrogant attitude at Netflix that its way is the only way; its algorithm is smarter than the most astute TV veterans, and anyone suggesting otherwise is just living in the past. That same posture has been palpable in recent Netflix PR disasters like its steadfast defense of Dave Chappelle's anti-trans rhetoric in his Netflix specials, and in the company's aggressive but so far largely unsuccessful pursuit of Academy Awards for its movie division.

For all the talk over the years by Netflix execs about the ways they are transforming the television industry, the core idea remains the same as it was in the days of *I Love Lucy*: Make shows that people really want to watch. With its tentacles reaching in so many directions, Netflix hasn't been doing enough of that for quite a while. Whether it can find its way back to the future remains to be seen. ®

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SAM TAYLOR/NETFLIX; STEVE DIETL/NETFLIX; NETFLIX, 2; KAILEY SCHWERMAN/NETFLIX; BETH DUBBER/NETFLIX; LARA SOLANKI/NETFLIX

SEXPERTS Mackey and Butterfield share carnal knowledge.

THE BEST OF NETFLIX

When the streamer's shows are good, they're very good

20. Sex Education

2019-PRESENT

YA has been a fruitful category for Netflix, particularly this rollicking Britcom. Shy teenager Otis (Asa Butterfield) has been miserable growing up with a single mom who's an outspoken sex therapist (Gillian Anderson). But when the kids at his school start having relationship difficulties, Otis, his queer best friend Eric (Ncuti Gatwa, in a star-making performance), and Otis' crush Maeve (Emma Mackey) start up a bootleg sex clinic to help their classmates get satisfaction. A comedy as sweet as it is silly, it explores a wide range of sexual and romantic relationships.

19. The Haunting of Hill House 2018

Horror filmmaker Mike Flanagan has graced Netflix with an unofficial franchise featuring many of the same actors (see also *The Haunting of Bly Manor* and *Midnight Mass*), starting with this crackling adaptation of the Shirley Jackson novel about a family that can't escape the history of the haunted house where they lived (and some of them died). Even at a time when it feels obligatory for a prestige drama to do long, continuous shots, the *Hill House* episode presented that way was a marvel.

18. The Baby-Sitters Club

2020-2021

Though adaptations of famous IP are all the rage right now, Netflix somehow couldn't find a big enough audience for this warmhearted take on Ann M. Martin's beloved book series about a group of middle-school girls who start up their own babysitting business. But those who did watch found a lot to cherish in the ways the show modernized aspects of the novels — in one episode, the shy Mary Anne (Malia Baker) stands up to ER doctors who keep misgendering her latest charge — while staying true to their coming-of-age heart.

17. Stranger Things

2016-Present

Like Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* sent the movie business on a never-ending hunt for blockbusters, the success of *Stranger Things* — itself an homage to the Eighties works of Spielberg and Stephen King — transformed Netflix from a company happy with boutique hits and critical acclaim into one that wanted its shows to attract huge audiences. If the series has begun to feel bloated in its later seasons (and if the kids look old enough to run for Congress), it's still terrific popcorn entertainment that's made at least one great new star in Millie Bobby Brown as the telekinetic Eleven.

16. Lady Dynamite

2016-2017

In its earlier years, Netflix built a large stable of shows whose individual audiences may not have been huge, but were designed to be some viewers' all-time favorites. Perhaps no series symbolized this creative ethos more than *Lady Dynamite*. Inspired by star Maria Bamford's struggles with bipolar disorder, it was weird, sad, and surreal as it bounced through multiple eras of her life, including the future.

15. The Crown 2016-PRESENT

The "10-hour movie" storytelling model has been bad for most Netflix dramas. One exception: Peter Morgan's old-school (in every sense) docudrama about Queen Elizabeth (played so far by Claire Foy and Olivia Colman, with Imelda Staunton set for the final seasons). The show wisely goes with a traditional crisis-of-the-week format, so that each episode has its own conflicts, even as they feed into fascinating larger questions about how the royals have to sublimate their own desires in service to an ideal they were born into.

14. Dear White People

2017-2021

Not every movie lends itself well to being adapted for television. The translations that work tend to involve ideas where there was more to say than could fit into a feature-length film. Case in point: Justin Simien's expansion of his sharp 2014 film about Black students at a predominantly white Ivy League school. The show had four seasons' worth of room to explore the perspec-

tives of what felt like everyone on campus, and to do bold experiments like turning much of the final season into a musical.

13. Squid Game
2021-PRESENT

Netflix has been way out ahead in terms of acquiring or developing programming for its international markets (*Elite, Money Heist, Lupin*). The best of these series is *Squid Game*, a riveting dystopian thriller out of Korea about financially desperate people who agree to compete in a deadly, winner-takes-all competition inspired by schoolyard games like Red Light, Green Light. A triumph of both social satire and production design, it became a rare word-of-mouth phenomenon.

12. When They See Us 2019

It was an infamous story made even more harrowing when it became clear the cops and the media had gotten it so wrong: A woman was brutally raped in Central Park, and five young men of color were convicted, only to be exonerated years later, when the real attacker confessed. Ava DuVernay's dramatization of the story packs a wallop throughout, but especially in the sequences depicting what Korey Wise (Emmy winner Jharrel Jerome) endured as the only member of the Central Park Five sentenced as an adult.

11. Mindhunter 2017-2019

David Fincher executive-produced *House of Cards*, but his best contribution to Netflix was his return to the serial-killer territory of *Se7en* and *Zodiac*. This time, he approached the genre from a different direction, with a drama about the FBI agents (played by Jonathan Groff and Holt McCallanny) and psychiatrist (Anna Torv) who created the science of criminal profiling. The bulk of the show is just the agents talking with incarcerated monsters — making *Mindhunter* the odd thriller that's all talk and little action, and much more interesting for it.

10. Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt 2015-2019

We have to blur the lines to call *Kimmy* a Netflix original, since the first season was produced to air on NBC, before network executives there panicked that the show — about a young woman (Ellie Kemper) rescued from years trapped in a doomsday cult's underground bunker — would be too weird or sad to work for them. But Tina Fey and Robert Carlock's creation had a healthy and frequently hilarious four-season run when it surely would have died within a few weeks on NBC. A win-win.

REIN MAN BoJack tries to get control.

9. One Day at a Time
2017-2019

Even beyond *Kimmy Schmidt*, Netflix built an early reputation as a viewer-friendly place by rescuing canceled shows from broadcast and cable networks. Eventually, the roles reversed, and we had a situation where this smart, funny, and poignant Norman Lear revival — starring Justina Machado as a Cuban American single mom raising teen kids with the help of her mother, Lydia (Rita Moreno), and dealing with hot-button issues like immigration, sexuality, and PTSD — was canceled by Netflix and then revived for a fourth season by cable channel Pop.

8. Unbelievable
2019

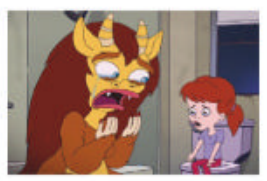
Netflix and actress Merritt Wever have been a strong team over the years. She won an Emmy for her gun-slinging role in 2017's *Godless*, stole scenes in *Marriage Story*, and was phenomenal here as an empathetic cop (alongside Toni Collette) on the trail of a serial rapist. TV is inundated with mediocre true-crime dramatizations, but *Unbelievable* — which featured a fantastic Kaitlyn Dever as a victim of the rapist who was somehow charged with lying to police about it — is one great enough to live up to its title.

7. Master of None
2015-PRESENT

Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* was among the best of the wave of auteur-driven TV in the 2010s. He wrote, directed, and starred in the show's ambitious and lovely early seasons, which mixed stories of his alter ego, Dev, who was looking for love, with tales of the people in Dev's life: his immigrant father's journey to America, his friend Denise (Lena Waithe) gradually coming out to her family, even a digression about New York cabbies. After a long break, it returned last year with a *Scenes From a Marriage*-inspired story about Denise, which was less interesting, even as it suggested that Ansari and Waithe had not run out of ambition.

6. I Think You Should Leave With Tim Robinson
2019-PRESENT

Each season of Tim Robinson's sketch-comedy delight is six episodes of less than 20 minutes apiece. Yet within that efficient packaging exist indelible, explosive comedy bits, many of them about people who take some dumb belief and refuse to let go of it until everyone around them is deeply uncomfortable. Bonus points for the hot-dog car sketch ("We're all trying to find the guy who did this!") becoming the single most useful meme of the past four years.



5. Big Mouth 2017-PRESENT

An animated show about middle schoolers that probably shouldn't be watched by middle schoolers, *Big Mouth* focuses on the rampaging horniness of characters like Nick (co-creator Nick Kroll), Andrew (John Mulaney), Jessi (Jessi Klein), and the pillow-molesting Jay (Jason Mantzoukas). And that's even before we get to all the filthy fantasies put into the kids' heads by hormone monsters like Connie (Maya Rudolph). Yet for as graphic as the series gets, it has a fundamental empathy for kids going through one of the most uncomfortable stages of life.

4. American Vandal
2017-2018

Speaking of scatological adolescent ridiculousness, consider this note-perfect spoof of true-crime podcasts and docuseries in which a pair of high school filmmakers investigate two mysteries: Who defaced 27 cars in the faculty parking lot with drawings of penises, and who contaminated the cafeteria lemonade to make their classmates lose control of their bowels? As satire alone, it was wonderful. But beneath all the dick and poop jokes was an insightful and poignant look at the kids caught up in all this gross-out behavior.

3. Russian Doll
2019-PRESENT

We're finally entering the realm of Capital-G Greatness. Natasha Lyonne graduated from the next show on this list to her own co-creation: a high-concept series that bent genre as easily as it bent the laws of physics. In the flawless first season, Lyonne's irrepressible Nadia was cursed to die and be reborn over and over again on her 36th birthday. In the messier but still delightful second season, she began quantum leaping into the young lives of her mother and grandmother. *Russian Doll* is brimming with ideas and energy in a way few recent series (on Netflix or otherwise) can equal.

2. Orange Is the New Black 2013-2019

House of Cards was the kind of middle-aged-male antihero drama that television had seen plenty of before. *Orange*, a dramedy set at a federal women's prison with an enormous cast crossing boundaries of race, sexuality, gender, and more, felt brand-new, and like a sign that the streaming era would have lots of room for TV to keep evolving. That's not quite what happened, and *Orange* was more creatively uneven than many shows on this list. But its best moments were remarkable and symbolize a road the streamer hasn't taken nearly as often as it could.

1. BoJack Horseman
2014-2020

Yes, the one indisputable Netflix masterpiece is an animated dramedy about a depressed horse (Will Arnett) who once starred in a bad Nineties family sitcom and now contents himself with abusing both drugs and the trust of anyone who cares about him. *BoJack* was a parody of modern dramas about middle-aged male antiheroes who get away with everything. But it was also a supreme example of the form, as laugh-out-loud ridiculous and as soul-crushingly sad a show as has been produced during the streaming era.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: NOH JUHAN/NETFLIX; ERIC LIEBOWITZ/NETFLIX; MIKE YARISH/NETFLIX; NETFLIX 2; ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/NETFLIX; NETFLIX; BETH DUBBER/NETFLIX; NETFLIX; JOJO WHILDEN/NETFLIX; PATRICK HARBRON/NETFLIX; K.C. BAILEY/NETFLIX; TYLER GOLDEN/NETFLIX

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25 BEST SUPERHERO MOVIES OF ALL TIME

From origin stories to end games, Caped Crusaders to Spider-Men — our picks for the greatest superhero films to grace the big screen

BY DAVID FEAR, BRIAN HIATT, AND ALAN SEPINWALL

1

Black Panther

2018

Ryan Coogler's tale of T'Challa — part-time Avenger, full-time regent of the fictional African empire known as Wakanda — is more than just the crown jewel of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It's an old-school epic that combines widescreen thrills with a glorious, gorgeous Afro-futurist aesthetic and genuine moral gravitas; it proved that you could successfully fuse a filmmaker's sensibility into the MCU without compromising the corporate bottom line; and it gave us a Shakespearean tragedy in comic-book cosplay, complete with a conflicted hero (rest in peace and power, Chadwick Boseman) and a multilayered villain (Michael B. Jordan's Erik Killmonger). Most of all, it proved that superhero movies could be about something more than just entertainment — they could reflect, refract, and represent the real world around us while still transporting us to some other place entirely. They could be more than just a roller-coaster ride. They could, in fact, be cinema. Wakanda forever.

Boseman

Maguire

2 Spider-Man 2

2004

Sam Raimi's original *Spider-Man* was going to feature both the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus; instead, he saved Doc Ock for this masterpiece of a sequel, where the filmmaker's ultra-sincere approach to the material was firing on all cylinders — from Spidey's crisis of confidence to Alfred Molina as Peter Parker's tragic, mecha-tentacled foe. The subway train fight (and its aftermath) remains one of the genre's single most satisfying, emotional set pieces to date.

3. Logan

2017

In the 1980s, comic-book creators like Frank Miller helped define a mode of adult superhero storytelling, with noir-ish, ultraviolent stories set in something like the real world. James Mangold's magnificent *Logan* managed to bring that same approach into the movies, complete with a gloomy, dystopian, decapitation-packed take on the last days of Hugh Jackman's Wolverine. Nodding to classic Westerns, it depicts a not-altogether-unfamiliar future world where superheroic and American dreams are dying out together. And Patrick Stewart's chilling performance of the world's most powerful mind addled by dementia should've gotten him award nominations.

4. Avengers: Endgame

2019

If you saw this final chapter to the "Infinity Stones" saga on opening weekend, odds are the audience response to the return of T'Challa, Spider-Man, and every other hero Thanos turned to dust was the loudest you'd ever heard in a movie theater. That's the benefit of *Avengers: Endgame* acting as the equivalent of a season finale to a long, complicated, enormously entertaining narrative over a decade in the making. It gathers a number of MCU OGs together for one last hurrah, and that epic final battle against Thanos is one chill-inducing story beat after another.

5. Superman

1978

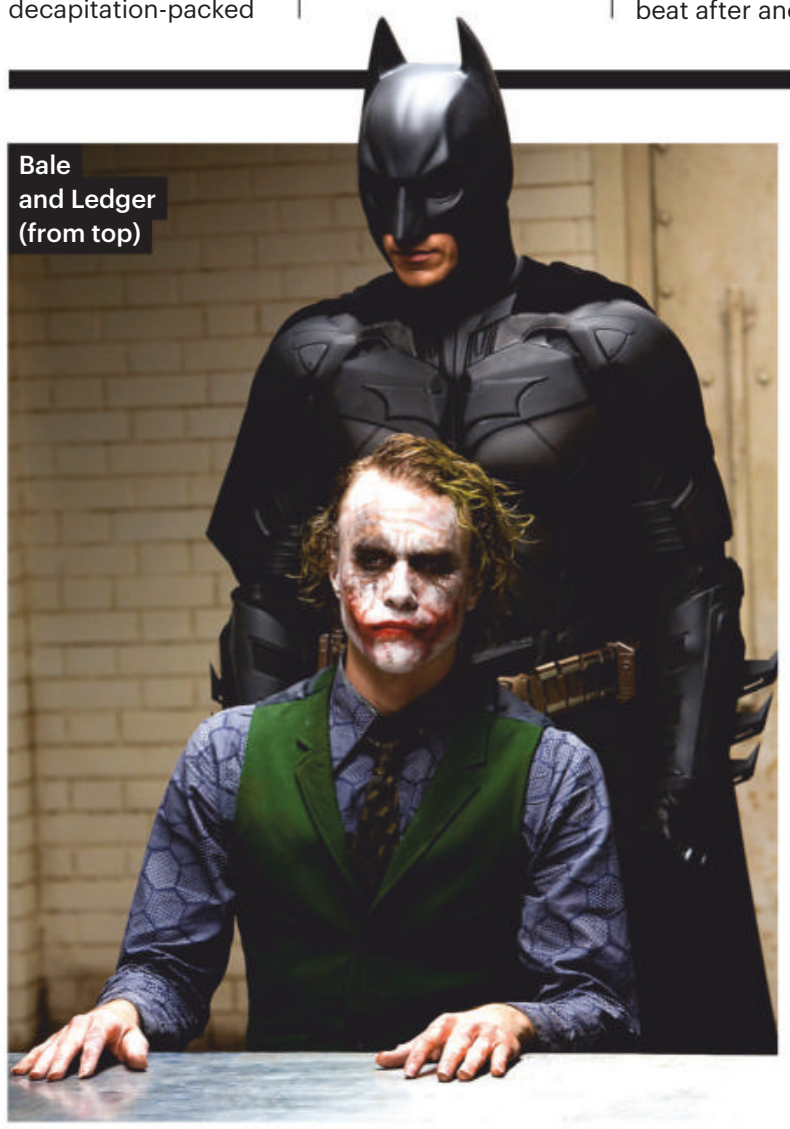
Yes, it was the movie that made you believe a man could fly. Yet the greatest special effect in Richard Donner's big-bang event for the genre simply involves Christopher Reeve removing his glasses, straightening his posture, and letting audiences see how a clumsy nerd named Clark Kent transforms into the Man of Steel. Such is the magic of Reeve's performance in both halves of the role — not to mention Margot Kidder's pitch-perfect Lois Lane and Gene Hackman's brilliant Lex Luthor. This is the superhero film that started it all.

Reeve

6. Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse

2018

This animated addition to the Spider-Man universe — make that universes, plural — is bursting with color, imagination, and Spider-Men . . . and women . . . and a wall-crawling pig. It's complicated yet never hard to follow, as Afro-Puerto Rican graffiti artist Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) inherits the Spidey mantle. The teen soon meets his peers from across parallel realities, voiced by everyone from Jake Johnson to Hailee Steinfeld to, yes, Nicolas Cage. Together, they must cross their webstrands and save the multiverse. A dazzlingly new take on a very old story.


Bale and Ledger (from top)

7 The Dark Knight

2008

"You either die the hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." The second in Christopher Nolan's game-changing *Batman* trilogy still centers around Christian Bale's moody, brooding Caped Crusader. But it's Heath Ledger's Joker — played as a stabby late-period Tom Waits, both funny *and* nightmare-inducing — that truly elevates this into the superhero-movie canon. And scenes like Batman's vertiginous Hong Kong building assault help achieve Nolan's stated goal of beating the Bond franchise.

8. Thor: Ragnarok

2017

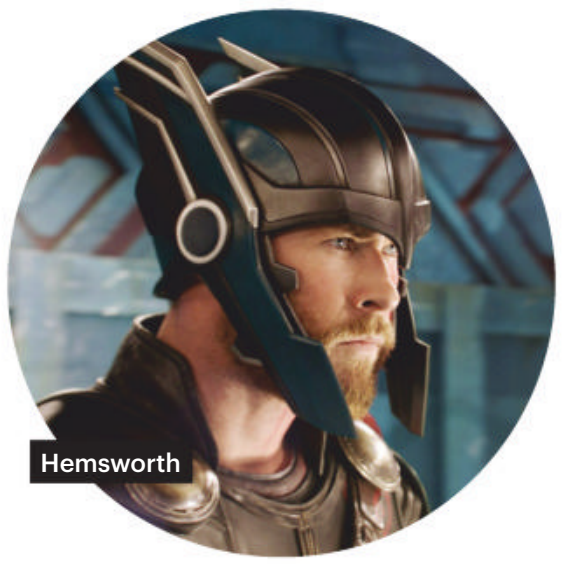
Director Taika Waititi pushed the MCU's usual self-deprecating humor to its limit and beyond, unlocking a comedic flair that Chris Hemsworth had never shown in his previous Thor films. It's both a perfect addition to the series' mythical tales of gods and monsters and a general skewering of the pomposity of the entire franchise — not to mention that Mr. Waititi was very much getting his money's worth for the rights to Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song."

Gadot

9 Wonder Woman

2017

Gal Gadot radiates benevolence as the title character — an Amazonian princess armed with a lasso of truth and an unbreakable moral compass — in a way that no actor had managed in a superhero movie since Christopher Reeve. And the World War I setting of Patty Jenkins' film helps familiar tropes feel fresh, as does the simple fact that a female superhero was finally getting a great movie of her own. The no-man's-land battle scene, with Wonder Woman's costume practically glowing against the gray backdrop as she deflects bullets and pummels soldiers, is indelible.


Hemsworth

10. Iron Man

2008

Tony Stark and his customized metallic suit may have been around since the beginning of Marvel's heyday, but outside of the comics, you could say he was a bit of a pop-culture nobody. The only reason he was given his own movie was because Marvel had sold away the rights to Spider-Man and the X-Men. Not to mention that Robert Downey Jr.'s career had seen better days. But the wisecracking combination of actor and role turned out to be perfect blockbuster alchemy, paving the way for the MCU to establish the dominant movie franchise of modern times. Not to mention the jaw-dropping post-credits appearance of Nick Fury, which suggested we'd only just scratched this cinematic universe's surface.

OPPOSITE PAGE: MATT KENNEDY/MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: COLUMBIA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; CLAY ENOS/WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; 2; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION

Incredibles, assemble!

11 The Incredibles

2004

Brad Bird's first Pixar movie is a dual homage to the *Ozzie and Harriet*-style sitcoms of the Fifties and the sleek, cool spy movies of the Sixties — not to mention that it's a great addition to superhero toons, with its sly, funny riff on a Fantastic Four-style group as a near-dysfunctional nuclear family. The retro look and primo action sequences add to the fun, but it's the voice work — Holly Hunter and Craig T. Nelson as Ma and Pa Incredible; Samuel L. Jackson as fellow crime fighter Frozone ("Honey! Where's my super-suit!?!"); Bird himself as the Anna Wintour avatar/world's greatest costume designer Edna Mode; and Jason Lee as a megalomaniacal supervillain nursing a long-held grudge — that really makes this shine.

12. Spider-Man: Homecoming

2017

Tom Holland's cameo as your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) suggested he'd bring something fresh to the Marvel icon; his first solo joint as the web-slinger confirmed it. This next-gen Spidey updates the character for the MCU-crossover age, solidifiying the Sony-Disney deal that allowed him to become a major part of the MCU while channeling the Peter Parker from Stan Lee's origin run — all teen angst and great-responsibility hand-wringing. Throw in a father-figure Iron Man and Michael Keaton's menacing, mecha-Vulture, and you have one truly amazing superhero movie.

Lawrence

13. X-Men: Days of Future Past

2014

Fox's X-Men franchise did its universe-spanning, time-traveling version of *Infinity War*/*Endgame* well before the MCU, and *Days of Future Past*'s wild ambitions pay off with an epic that feels as much like a massive comic-book crossover series as any movie ever made. The film manages to effectively jam together the original and youthful-reboot versions of the X-universe characters, and even pulls off a gambit to push Mystique, played by then-wildly-in-demand Jennifer Lawrence, to the center of the story without feeling contrived.

14. Spider-Man

2002

The web-swinging scenes alone — which showed how CGI could finally let filmmakers replicate comic-book visuals onscreen for real, opening the door to an entire era — would earn this classic its spot. But even more important, Sam Raimi understood the soap-operatic core of Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's creation, digging in hard on the film's central love story between Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) and literal girl-next-door Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst). In the process, he gave the world an upside-down kiss that will live forever.

15 Guardians of the Galaxy

2014

Who'd have guessed a hodgepodge group of supporting characters who sprouted from an obscure decades-old sci-fi comic would become a saving grace of the Marvel universe? James Gunn brought goofy, giddy fun to this story of interstellar outlaws whizzing across the cosmos, led by Chris Pratt's rakish thief Peter Quill and featuring the snarkiest raccoon ever to wield a blaster. It's a blast, from the vintage AM radio soundtrack to banter between Pratt and a green-hued Zoe Saldana. We are all Groot.

Bautista

16. Avengers: Infinity War

2018

Critics exasperated with the MCU's dominance tend to overlook the uniqueness of its intertwined storytelling — by 2018 it was already the most elaborate shared universe in cinematic history. Yet all those hints of things to come pay off handsomely with this first part of the Russo brothers' one-two punch, which is full of delightful fan-service pairings (Captain America and Groot, Thor and Star-Lord, Dr. Strange and Spider-Man), humongous action sequences (that battle in Wakanda), and genuine pathos as it becomes clear that Thanos will annihilate millions of people with a snap of his fingers. You get the sense that, for once, the bad guy *is* going to win.

17. X2

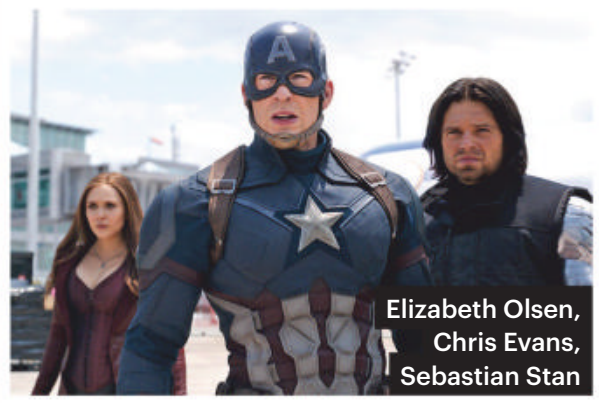
2003

"Have you found them? Have you found *all* the mutants?" The follow-up to 2000's *X-Men* features a genuinely unsettling moment in which a malevolent *Homo superior* tricks Patrick Stewart's Professor X into hunting down innocents — and that's only one of the many masterful set pieces in this film. From the opening White House assault to the straight-from-the-comics sequence of Hugh Jackman's Wolverine single-handedly fighting off an armed battalion, this helped set the bar for how to do superhero sequels and potent mutant metaphors (see the "coming out" exchange) just right.

18. Captain America: The Winter Soldier

2014

The first of the *Captain America* sequels distinguished itself by modeling its story after paranoid Seventies thrillers like *Three Days of the Condor* (it even cast Robert Redford as a S.H.I.E.L.D. official with some shady ulterior motives) and forcing the patriotic hero to fight against his own government — not to mention a fellow supersoldier straight out of his own past.


Elizabeth Olsen, Chris Evans, Sebastian Stan

(Welcome back, Bucky Barnes.) *Winter Soldier* proved that the MCU could fit a far wider style of stories into its big-picture sagas than just your typical good-vs.-evil parables. It also gives more screen time to some major supporting players (Black Widow, Falcon) and features some of the greatest fight scenes — dig that Cap-vs.-goons elevator melee — in any Marvel film, too.

FROM TOP: PIXAR; MARVEL STUDIOS; 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION

19 Batman: Mask of the Phantasm

1993

Serious Bat-nerds view *Batman: The Animated Series* as the truest screen adaptation of the character, and this film spinoff makes a seriously strong case for deserving pride of place. It takes the bottomless grief of its Bruce Wayne (voiced by Kevin Conroy) seriously without making his Batman insufferably grim and gritty. It has Mark Hamill — yes, *that* Mark Hamill — earning chilling laughs as the Joker. The era-spanning design of its Gotham City looks gorgeous on the big screen. And the introduction of Dana Delany as a woman from Bruce's past sets up one of the most tragic conclusions to any Bat story.

Conroy

20. Superman II

1980

Look, even the Man of Steel needs a break sometimes! Richard Lester's sequel to the original finds our planet's guardian wanting to retire to enjoy the normal life he's earned with Lois Lane. Unfortunately, he decides to call it a day right as three Kryptonian supervillains break out of the Phantom Zone and try to conquer Earth. The Christopher Reeve-Margot Kidder-Gene Hackman core makes it all sing, as does the focus on the relationship between Superman and the woman he loves. Also: Kneel before Zod!

22. Robocop

1987

Paul Verhoeven's merciless skewering of America's obsession with law and order is one helluva social satire — but it's also a superhero movie (or maybe a super-antihero movie), and a really great one at that. After Peter Weller's police officer in future-dystopia Detroit is murdered, he's assembled into a cyborg that's marketed as the cutting-edge of crime fighting. Soon, this robotic law officer begins suspecting there's something shady going on with his corporate masters. The violence is so over-the-top that it plays like a parody of might-makes-right comic-book morality stories, which is part of the point. We'd still buy this for a dollar!

Reynolds

Moviegoers met Ryan Reynolds' Wade Wilson way back in 2009's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Fans thought this early version of the Merc with the Mouth felt too tame, so when director Tim Miller brought the character back for his own stand-alone movie, we got to see a much more violent, way more vulgar version of the cult comic character. Ryan Reynolds inherently got why this wiseass assassin-for-hire was such a fan favorite: He's extremely good at killing people, *and* he never shuts up. It leans into Wade Wilson's obnoxious, snark-heavy bad behavior and doesn't flinch when it comes to taking the genre into NSFW gross-out comedy territory. The result made those other "edgy" superhero movies feel like Disney cartoons by comparison.

Cumberbatch

21 Doctor Strange

2016

Meet Stephen Strange, former surgeon turned Master of the Mystic Arts. Benedict Cumberbatch lends just the right amount of wounded pride and tongue-in-cheek humor to the inaugural big-screen adventure of the Sorcerer Supreme, while director Scott Derrickson makes you feel like you're watching those surreal, hallucinogenic Steve Ditko panels from the original comics come to life. That M.C. Escher-style chase scene remains an MCU highlight. And the character was so popular he'd end up becoming the go-to supernatural guest star in virtually every other Marvel movie that came after.

Batman Returns

1992

Tim Burton's original 1989 *Batman* is the more historically important film, but his aggressively weird sequel — including Danny DeVito as a grotesque mutant Penguin and Christopher Walken as a Trump-ish politician — is ultimately the more memorable movie, in particular thanks to Michelle Pfeiffer's wonderfully perverse purr-formance as Catwoman. It also feels more like a Burton film than its predecessor, from its melancholy tone to the hints of mall-goth kink, and the weird friction between his style and the traditional good-vs.-evil comic-book story helps make this stand out as a superior Caped Crusader movie.

24

Pfeiffer

25. The Rocketeer

1991

The bulk of the post-*Batman* wave of throwback pulp-hero adaptations (*The Shadow, The Phantom*) were forgettable, but Joe Johnston's tale of a World War II-era pilot with a jetpack battling gangsters and Nazis is a retro delight. Has there ever been a more photogenic superhero couple than Billy Campbell and Jennifer Connelly? Years later, Johnston would apply a similar gee-whiz tone to 2011's *Captain America: The First Avenger*. But this tribute to the old-fashioned derring-do of 1930s serials, i.e., the original superhero movies, got there first.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; MARVEL STUDIOS/EVERETT COLLECTION; 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION; WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION

PLANET HUNGER

[*Cont. from 43*] dream about building a giant high-tech indoor farm in Kentucky to turn central Appalachia into the ag-tech capital of the U.S. The dream would create jobs and grow food more efficiently, and with a far smaller carbon footprint, than the old-fashioned way of sticking a seed in the ground, hiring illegal immigrants for the harvest, then loading the yield into 18-wheelers and trucking it all the way to a supermarket near you. I thought it was a noble but crazy dream, given that Webb had a background in solar, not as a farmer. He knew as much about growing tomatoes on a commercial scale as I did.

Flash forward five years: Webb and I are walking through a 60-acre high-tech indoor farm near Morehead, Kentucky. His dream had become real: AppHarvest, the company he started shortly before we talked, has gone public and now has a market cap of $300 million. "The old way is broken," Webb tells me. "This is the future of food." It felt like a jungle inside, but a well-organized one. Seven-hundred thousand tomato plants grew on scaffoldings, their roots in pods of water. Three-hundred sensors monitor microclimates across the farm, maintaining proper light and humidity. The farm uses 100 percent recycled rainwater. No chemicals, no pesticides, no agricultural runoff. LED lights provide sunlight on cloudy days. Temperature is controlled. And this whole system is cloneable, and will only become more efficient over time. When I visited, Webb was overseeing the construction of two other indoor farms in Kentucky, one to grow berries, another for greens. It is, above all else, a way to make climate partly irrelevant. It's not hard to imagine a future of high-rise vertical farms.

But vertical farms are not going to feed starving people in Yemen anytime soon. For that, food will have to be grown the old-fashioned way, by sticking a seed in the ground and praying for rain. "People will shift crops around, try new varieties," Racelis tells me one afternoon as we drive around the farms in Texas' Rio Grande Valley. "But in the end, there is no getting around the laws of physics and biology. When it gets too hot, things die."

IN MONTANA, I watch Tester climb into his $300,000 tractor and head out into his fields with his $200,000 seeder. The seeder looks like a trailer armed with 50-some big hypodermic needles that inject wheat seeds into the ground. It's a masterpiece of mechanization, capable of seeding 100 acres of wheat in a single afternoon. Tester's whole rig, in fact, is a technological wonder: The cab of the tractor has filtered air, a sound system, and a cushy, ergonomic chair. You can plant 100 acres and feel like you never left your living room.

But Tester's rig also underscores a big truth about modern agriculture: The scale of farming may have changed, and the tools we use more sophisticated, but the process of growing food hasn't changed since the dawn of history. Tester is doing basically the same thing as farmers in Egypt did 5,000 years ago, putting a seed in the ground, hoping it grows, and that nothing kills or eats it before you can harvest it.

As I drive away from Tester's farm, I see the senator alone on his tractor, planting wheat on the high plains of Montana, just as his family has done on this piece of land for more than a century. It's an iconic sight, as American as apple pie. It's tempting to take comfort in this continuity. But this is a new world we're living in, one without a rain cloud on the horizon, and miles of drought as far as the eye can see

There are lots of things we can do to make ourselves less vulnerable to food shocks and shortages. Growing more local food would make us less dependent on global supply chains; diversifying what we eat, so we are less dependent on wheat and corn; not wasting land to turn food into fuel, so that the land can be used to grow food for people who are hungry; using better data to understand exactly how much water and fertilizer crops need, so farmers can reduce the waste; fermenting foods from fungi and developing cell-based meats, so that cheap proteins can be grown with far less land and water use. We're going to need all of these solutions – and many more – to feed the world in the coming decades.

Putin's weaponization of wheat is a tragedy for hungry people around the world who depend on cheap food to survive. But it is also a wake-up call for the rest of us. Just as the invasion of Ukraine has sparked a movement to get off oil and gas to strip Putin of the source of his power and money, this Putin-driven food freakout should spur the need to change our food system to prepare for the climate-driven shocks that will reshape our world in the future. As with fossil fuels, the political inertia and financial power of the Old World are the biggest roadblocks to change. But the stakes couldn't be higher. Food is not just a necessity; it is the basis of life itself. A civilization that can't feed itself is a civilization that is not long for this world. ®

UKRAINE

[*Cont. from 46*] There is no evidence of widespread abuse of prisoners of war by Ukrainian forces, but there are several ongoing criminal investigations into isolated incidents in which Russian prisoners appear to have been tortured or even executed.

The military here has more than doubled since Russia's invasion in late February. More than 700,000 Ukrainians are now under arms, and perhaps only one-third of those have received anything resembling professional military training. But there is no shortage of hatred on the battlefield. Only days before, I attended a Defense Ministry briefing, unveiling a series of online videos designed to ensure Ukrainian soldiers understood the laws of war.

"Sometimes we face skepticism, people say, 'Well, the Russians don't obey the rules of war. Why should we?' " said Col. Viacheslav Rayevskiy, the officer conducting the briefing. "But it is about being a civilized army."

Ukraine can't afford to let untrained soldiers jeopardize Western support, and it wants to highlight that it takes the issue seriously. The moral high road is as much an asset in this fight as any weapon system. Ukraine has worked to codify the laws of war into the Ukrainian criminal code, to bring the country in line with the generally accepted norms of international humanitarian law, according to Col. Rayevskiy. "It's the sign of a European, modern democratic army," he said.

When I look back, the prisoner is still on his knees: He's talking. He appears alive and unharmed. I don't see anyone pointing a weapon at him. What did I hear? An accidental discharge? A celebratory gunshot? A mock execution? There is no way to know.

"Can we stop? Can I talk to him?"

Mace doesn't look back, he makes the turn and accelerates. It's hardly the first time the paratrooper has seen a Russian prisoner. "If he hears you speaking English, then he'll spread tales of American puppet masters in these woods," he says.

Besides, Mace explains, he doesn't know who those soldiers are. They aren't in his unit.

The last I see of the Russian, he is alive and on his knees, being interrogated in the field.

WHEN "SASHA" GETS in the car, he says he just doesn't want to talk about anything. Sasha has been waiting outside the one grocery store in Kramatorsk that is still functioning: Its parking lot has become a local hot spot for soldiers to meet up for rides to and from the front. He tosses his bags in the back and squeezes into the rear seat of the Chinese-made sedan that will ferry me back to my own vehicle.

The big brooding soldier is unshaven, his fatigues filthy from combat, except for a field hat that is clearly brand new. The local driver who has been shuttling me around has agreed to bring the soldier to Dnipro: He has leave papers and is trying to get home to Mykolaiv, so that'll take him about halfway. The fuel shortage is critical in eastern Ukraine for non-military traffic, so filling a civilian car with strangers headed roughly the same direction has become a common practice: There are Telegram channels where people offer and seek rides to and from every city.

Less than 30 minutes into the drive, Sasha opens up suddenly and unexpectedly. What he reveals is chilling, and indicative of how bad things have gotten in Donbas.

"I nearly beat to death one of the men in my unit," he confides. "We were in trenches on the front lines. He was using his cellphone."

Sasha breathes heavily.

"The Russians tracked his signal and located our position. He called his mom for 15 minutes, then his wife for 15 minutes . . . and then his girlfriend for almost two hours. They bombarded us all night. That's why I beat him."

Later, he tells us more about the front.

"We lost six men on our first patrol," he says. "Six out of 10. They were all my friends."

He breaks down and begins to cry.

Sasha eventually admits that he has been given leave to go to a hospital to seek therapy, for what soldiers a century ago would have called shell shock and what we now call PTSD. He has been given 10 days to recover from his battlefield trauma and return to his unit.

When we have a chance to talk alone, he shows me videos of his wedding in October. He tells me he is scared to talk to his family about his experiences. Sasha doesn't want to return to combat. All he can think about are the soldiers who were killed on his first patrol.

"Those six men were my friends, they were my brothers, and I love them very much," he says. "I can't just leave them behind. I will always carry them with me."

He looks down, overcome with emotion.

"What is in my heart is that I never wish to see Donbas again in the future. Nothing you do there makes any difference." ®

[*Cont. from 89*] been in the process of slowly selling it off because its value was peaking. "They actually picked the peak day of the market to hack me," he says. "Most altcoins, as they call them, never got higher than that day."

Nevertheless, even if the value of what he stole was highly inflated, even illusory, Pinsky stole it. And Terpin wanted to make an example of him. He started reaching out to those he thought might have been involved and offering them money for information about the hack (Terpin does not dispute this, but says that he has "not paid anything to date, let's put it that way"). Soon, the calls were rolling in. "My wife's joke," he tells me, "is that every Saturday morning, we would get some kind of call from somebody using Auto-Tune to disguise their voice."

Some of those people, Terpin thinks, must have had a grudge against Pinsky. Some were clearly trying to squirm out of trouble themselves. But the calls solidified Terpin's belief that he was dealing with a teenage villain, a "Baby Al Capone," as he puts it. Terpin became convinced that Pinsky was hiding money – from other heists if not his own – that he was going on lavish trips, buying costly watches, and otherwise trying to pull one over on Terpin.

That is all possible. "A big part of these cases is trying to recover the funds, and there's no way of knowing if you've gotten them all," says Erin West, the deputy district attorney for REACT, the high-tech task force that arrested Truglia. Bitcoin offers anonymity by design. The factors needed to access bitcoin funds could be memorized and exist only in the mind of their owner, or written down in the margins of a random book, or stored on a buried hardware wallet. Investigators comb through houses, looking for papers that might contain seed phrases or passcodes or keys. They read defendants' mail in the hopes that they'll uncover clues. They listen in on their calls. And they know that they don't find everything. For some of her cases, says West, "We went through the numbers and we went through the numbers and we went through the numbers, and there is money missing."

Yet Pinsky has a clear rebuttal to the idea that he's hiding millions: He's not in prison. Terpin's case is a civil one, not a criminal one. In part, that has to do with Pinsky's age at the time of the heist, but it also has to do with the fact that, as he states plainly, "I cooperated and was completely forthcoming with law enforcement." (The FBI declined to comment on an "ongoing matter.") Pinsky's not sure how he's supposed to prove to Terpin that he isn't hiding some crypto fortune – "It's hard to prove a negative" – but says he has spent much of the past two years trying. He imagines that the government may monitor him for the rest of his life to make sure his lifestyle is what it seems it should be. When I ask if he has also worked with the FBI to help bring down other hackers, he blinks quickly and then changes the subject.

ONE DAY IN late April, Pinsky wants to go for a walk. Spring is here, and the city seems to have come alive, teeming with sundresses and good will. As he meanders past the fish stalls of Chinatown and the sidewalk cafes of SoHo, he blends into the crowd, a compact coed in a T-shirt and cords. Today, the 562 bitcoins he'd returned to Terpin happens to be worth $24,539,814, though who's to say whether he is keeping track. He considers shelling out for some ice cream. It is a good day for simple delights.

Blending in has done Pinsky good. His senior year of high school was a travesty of notoriety after a round of settlement agreements fell through in 2020 and Terpin started publicizing the heist and Pinsky's role in it. Most of his friends' parents no longer wanted their kids hanging out with him. At graduation, he received thunderous applause, but he knew the cheers were ironic, offered only because, as he puts it, "I had become this person of interest in my town, but for all the wrong reasons."

He had also become someone who was constantly looking over his shoulder. His family's home invasion had occurred only a few weeks before graduation. Police had arrived in time to apprehend two of the four men who were attempting to break in. One was found in the basement, and was led out of the house in handcuffs while Pinsky's mom screamed, "Who sent you? Who sent you?" The two men were sentenced to 60 months jail time on counts of Hobbs Act Robbery, but Pinsky knows that their partners are still out there somewhere. Maybe they still think Pinsky is hiding a fortune. Maybe others do. "The scariest part about it all is that I didn't have it," he says of the money. "And so, what would it take for them to believe that?" After the break-in, Pinsky says, his family got an assault rifle, and he started taking his mom along to the shooting range. He admits that being around her is hard now: As supportive as she's tried to be, she moves through the world with a fear she never had before, and he knows that's his fault. (Pinsky's mother and stepfather declined to speak for this article.)

Often, Pinsky says, he wishes he could just sit down with Terpin and talk things through. Even outside the Triggers heist, he knows that a lot of the things he did were ugly. There were other accounts of Terpin's that Pinsky got into with lesser degrees of success. There was money he tried to move even days later, sending instructions for how to launder it in the breaks between his classes at school. There were people he threatened, and people who feared him. He's aware that when he got behind a computer, he became a kind of monster, and that the monster is all that Terpin knows. "I can see where they're coming from," he says. "We were all doing this sociopathic crap. I would not hang out with a 15-year-old Ellis. I would run away from him. Even at 16, I would run away from him. Even at 18, I would run away from him. Probably not as fast."

Much of what is in this article, much of what Pinsky tells me over the course of our time together, is verifiable through legal documents, photos, texts, emails, and other sources. There is no doubt that the SIM-swapping crime happened; Pinsky's and Terpin's versions of the particulars mostly align. (For matters such as the contents of the safe and the itinerary of the night out with Truglia, I am relying on Pinsky's account.) What can never be verified is what is or was in Pinsky's head – the way he felt or didn't feel in certain moments, his motivations or lack thereof, his view of the crime as a game.

I point out that people who get caught are the ones who tend to see the error of their ways, and he doesn't dispute that. But, he says, he looks at it differently: Who would he be if he hadn't gotten caught, if he hadn't gotten this crash course in "What's right and wrong from my lawyers, books, my therapist"? He speaks of morality as though it were an academic pursuit, something one could steep oneself in and internalize. He's read *Crime and Punishment*, *Extreme Ownership*, *Letters From a Stoic*. Sometimes, he's found himself watching a video of Terpin recounting the hack. "And he spoke about it rather matter-of-fact, but hearing in his words how methodical and calculated this was, I felt very, very ashamed," Pinsky says. "It added a human element to what was, back then, this completely online thing for me. I feel like shame is not the most useful feeling, but I have accountability. Certainly, I don't feel good about what I've done." He's talking to me because he "wants people to recognize that." He wants people to know that "things change, and in my life, things have changed for the better."

He says that college has helped with that. He was sure that he wouldn't get in, but then, miraculously, just a few days before Terpin's lawsuit was filed, he got his acceptance letter to a university he asks me not to name. He also says he got a free ride and that not paying tuition has helped his family cover legal fees, though they can't be paid forever. Pinsky is coming to terms with the likelihood that the settlement negotiations will not go his way.

What he can't come to terms with is the idea that something he did when he was 15 years old might be the main thing that ever defines him. He's majoring in computer science and economics, and wants to be an entrepreneur, a field that doesn't necessarily require a pristine backstory and that might even value a bit of a renegade one. He's developed an app called Rentr that connects people who need things to people who own them (at the time of this writing, you can get a Canon printer, an electric scooter, a hookah, and a wedding tent, among other items). He wants to add value for a change, he says, "to eventually try to be useful." It's the language of disruption mixed up with the language of remorse.

When he moved into his dorm last year, he'd surprised his suitemates by pulling down his name from the front door and barricading himself in his room each night. Sometimes he wanted to tell them why – that he'd done something very bad and that people who thought he had lots of money might try to come after him – but he could never quite bring himself to do so. Since then, however, things have gotten less fraught. He's made a few close friends. Over time, he's told them what he's done, and they've kept being friends with him anyway. He spent last fall studying abroad in Florence, Italy. The farther he gets from Irvington, the easier he says it is to distance himself from what he did there.

These days, Pinsky rarely goes back to Irvington. He avoids the blue bedroom, the picturesque Main Street, the far-off lights of the Tappan Zee Bridge. He avoids the places where he can't even attempt to blend in. Irvington was meant to be a place of calm, not calamity, but Pinsky could have gotten his family killed there. Going home is too much of a reminder of everything that went wrong. "I think about what I've put them through, and I feel really, really bad and selfish," he says. It's a moment of clarity that can make things a little too clear.

At the end of our walk, Pinsky and I finally end up in a park. Musicians are busking, and people are lounging on the grass, sunglasses on, faces tipped back toward the late-afternoon sky. There is a carefree element that he hopes he can one day share. "I deeply want to distance myself from all of this stuff," he tells me. "It is so ugly, so bad, so gross. There's nothing more than I want to do than move on." For now, moving on may be more of a mental exercise than a material one, but it's the next level up. Pinsky will do whatever it takes to get there.

[*Cont. from 115*] testimony, and her interview with ROLLING STONE, in which she claims to have built the dresser but turned down an offer to stay and chat, going grocery shopping for her son and grandson instead. She loved them too much, she says, to ever move away. "I know what Anna Grimley was saying, but I wasn't leaving," Lori tells RS. "These people are living on rumor and gossip, and it's not true."

IF PATIENTS EVER ASKED about Bianca's death, the staff at Larry's practice had been instructed to change the subject, some former staff members say. No flowers. No condolence calls. No sympathy cards. Just the usual hundreds or thousands of dollars upfront, with a five percent discount as incentive for cold hard cash. This was Three Rivers Dental Group, and they had a motto to uphold: "No sights, no sounds, and no fears!"

But fear reverberated louder than ever in 2017, when employees remember returning from a weekend to discover security cameras installed all over – in the operatories above the patients, in the private break room, in the lab. That's where Holly Dey recalls leaning over to a fellow assistant, only for the boss to ring up the front desk from Arizona and ask why they were whispering. Holly and her co-worker say she'd been asking for a tampon.

Receptionist Jessica Moore remembers musing that Trump was unfit for the presidency, then watching Larry rant about "left-wing idiots" when he was in town. After she joked with a colleague about a pug with a penchant for sportswear, Moore says she was told there was to be no more pet talk – making her believe the boss had listened to that conversation, too.

Moore recalls Larry arriving at the Greensburg location within days, carrying a stack of waivers: "In light of this open surveillance environment, you do not have any expectation of privacy while in the offices of Three Rivers Dental Group," they read. Moore, noting that the consent form did not exclude the women's room, refused to sign. She remembers Larry responding, "You just fuckin' *terminated* yourself," before she walked off the job.

After Bianca's death, Larry regularly traveled from Paradise Valley to Pittsburgh. Following in his footsteps, branch to branch to branch, was Lori, who had already all but moved in with him at the Rudolph family mansion in Arizona. As executive administrator, Lori was a self-described enforcer and empire builder who could help with insurance claims or paychecks: When dentists had a money question, Larry often sent them to his not-so-secret girlfriend.

A dozen former doctors and employees at Three Rivers Dental outlined to ROLLING STONE a routine, echoed in court documents, of overzealous drilling: If a dentist performed basic tooth fillings, which cost about $150 each and awarded $120 in claims, Larry "would lose his ever-loving mind," recalls a person tasked with approving such procedures. Larry's checklist, obtained by ROLLING STONE, would set in motion the daily protocol to grind down problem teeth to the point where a root canal was the go-to option, doctors and employees allege. That way, says a former employee familiar with company finances, X-rays could force insurers to approve procedures for upward of $1,000. "All of it," the employee says, "was a root-canal factory."

In her interview with ROLLING STONE, Lori defended the "whole protocol" at Three Rivers as above board, and blamed any discrepancies on its employees. "That's bullshit," she says. "We never defrauded an insurance company."

But there was also, as six former employees describe, the cash. Several staffers recall accepting regular cash payments from customers of over $10,000, for which the IRS requires formal documentation. "Lori and Dr. Rudolph would have us not ever put down that we collected cash," one former office manager claims. Toward the end of each day, three former staffers say, they would drop bill stacks into the safe at each Three Rivers location. Staffers also claim that only Larry and Lori were supposed to empty the safes when they were in town. The employee close to the books believed then that the cash funded Larry and Lori's "fun money," and the government has recently taken to alleging "that the two had siphoned cash from dental practices to finance their life together."

Internal documents and emails show Larry going to some lengths to ensure that paperwork was in order. But the Pennsylvania attorney general's office, per a note at the bottom of an internal police memo, had been investigating Larry for insurance fraud since at least 2011. (No charges have been filed.) "We were in good shape, we were making money," Lori says. Of the practice, she adds: "Some people like to say that all we took was cash. We can prove that we didn't. We took plenty of different types of payments."

Lori's personal bank accounts, meanwhile, showed large cash deposits: $20,000 in 2014, $60,000 in 2015, $75,000 in 2016, the year Bianca died, and totaling roughly $239,800 by 2017. Lori has claimed under oath that she doesn't recall the money dumps or understand why her salary was doubled in cash, other than that Larry "was very generous."

In the spring of 2017, nine life-insurance policies and accidental-death claims in the Bianca tragedy had come through to Larry. As with the thumb, however, private investigators for the insurers concluded that there wasn't enough information to *not* approve his claims. The Rudolphs had set up a survivor's trust for the life insurance, policy documents reveal – less than six months before Bianca's death. Larry first inquired about processing the insurance, a court filing alleges, two days after his daughter finally learned her mother was gone. The payday was $4,877,744.93.

That summer, according to property records, Larry purchased a $3.5 million lot in Paradise Valley, so Lori could build a custom mansion – a desert castle all her own, a mile and a half from the last place Bianca called home.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT has been investigating Larry Rudolph ever since a friend of Bianca contacted the FBI's South African attaché, suspecting foul play, two weeks after her death.

But this was the age of a Teflon Don, when you could shoot somebody in the middle of Fifth Avenue and become president. Once the funeral cleared out, Larry and Lori binge-watched election coverage for days. Then Larry tweeted, incessantly, at the new president's sons, flaunting his Safari Club experience in a plea for their father to nominate him as director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The FBI first called him about his wife, according to the feds, in 2017.

The American ambassador in Lusaka, Dan Foote, says he got a 2018 briefing of mostly circumstantial evidence about Bianca's death from his consular chief. He expressed concern about a case built on life insurance and a love triangle, about a mystery in the middle of nowhere. "Well, fuck, it's kinda late," the ambassador recalls telling the consular chief. "Are you guys gonna be able to put the pieces together at this point?"

In 2019, Larry and Lori moved out of Bianca's beloved home – "He didn't feel comfortable there anymore," Lori says – and into a condo while Lori's castle broke ground. The neighbors-to-be would invite him and Lori over for a glass of wine, and Larry bragged about the trophy room he was having built; he'd killed so many animals, it needed two floors.

Mark Swanepoel, the same hunting guide who'd driven with Larry to get the Zambian cops on the day of Bianca's death, allegedly told him the feds were in Africa. But here was Lori, at the leathery back bar of Ocean 44 in Scottsdale, going on about buying a house in Pennsylvania, too. She was sick of that condo off Wild Turkey Drive. A petty argument gave way to a break in the music.

That's when their regular bartender claimed he witnessed Larry going off. Lori has formally disputed the bartender's story, but he would immediately tell co-workers that he heard Larry scream at least part of something so loudly that he believed a family sitting nearby heard it, too:

"I killed my fucking wife for you."

In any case, murder would be difficult to prove. The lead agent assigned to the cold case found Anna Grimley and asked her about that afternoon with the dresser, but the bartender had been afraid to speak up so far. His partner cross-checked with Zambian authorities about pathology and ballistics reports – when a local cop had tested dropping Larry's shotgun, it hadn't fired, but the instructions for his firearm said that it could still always accidentally discharge. The feds even re-created 100 new versions of the leather gun bag; the Rudolphs' old leather case, though, had evidence of a bullet hole blown straight through the top. Lori worried the feds were closing in – as close as the chatty woman sitting next to her and Larry on an airplane. "We'd be in restaurants," Lori remembers, "and I'd go, 'I think that's an FBI agent.' "

Swanepoel would come to speak with the FBI as well. His ex-wife relayed to them that she'd been present when Larry allegedly asked him to be put in contact with a Nigerian gangster who might fly to the States and intimidate an enemy. According to an FBI agent's testimony, Swanepoel, who declined to comment to ROLLING STONE through his attorney, allegedly acknowledged "those types of conversations had been had over the years, possibly while drinking." Larry and Swanepoel set off to Ethiopia in May 2021, the testimony shows, on a two-week safari. They were hunting African leopard again. Back in Pittsburgh, the FBI was knocking on Lori's door. She hid inside and bought a same-day ticket to Phoenix, prosecutors say. Larry killed the big cat, then allegedly cut his trip short.

Last November, the FBI partners had already found the game scout at the Kafue River and were beginning to crack the front desk at Three Rivers Dental. A few days after Thanksgiving, Larry and Lori found their seats at an intimate, $5,800-per-plate steak dinner for the Arizona Republican Party. He was in slacks and a polo shirt; she wore diamonds on diamonds on diamonds. "It was one of those dinners where they keep pouring wine," Lori recalls. She'd questioned the results of the 2020 election – "total fraud," Lori had tweeted – but the talk that night was of redistricting for 2022, how it might leave two seats in Washington up for grabs. Then the minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives walked in. Kevin McCarthy stood at the head of the table to give

his boilerplate toast. Moments later, at the other end of the table, Larry offered a toast of his own: He was thinking about running for Congress himself.

Larry and Lori closed Three Rivers Dental for the holidays and boarded a flight from Phoenix to Cabo on Dec. 21. Lori says she spotted passengers boarding at the last minute and forcing a family to switch seats; upon landing, she remembers a sudden passport procedure. And she'll never forget looking back, from halfway up the jet bridge, as immigration officials shouted "We got him!" and proceeded to take Larry into custody. "We were betrayed by our own government," Lori says. "It was a witch hunt."

Prosecutors from the U.S. attorney's office would soon charge Larry with foreign murder and mail fraud of seven life-insurers. Larry, who did not respond to multiple letters received at his detention facility in Denver, maintains his innocence and pleaded not guilty. His children, who did not respond to requests for comment, formally support him.

Lori had not been ready when prosecutors came at her in January, lawyerless in front of Larry's grand jury, asking about the cash deposits and the argument at the bar and the alleged ultimatum to leave Bianca. Lori calls this a "perjury trap." Her attorney, John Dill, says evidence at trial will reveal "what actually took place" with the bartender and Anna Grimley after what he argued was a failed attempt by prosecutors to make Lori flip on Larry. They still charged her with five counts of lying under oath, one for obstructing justice, and another for accessory to murder. She has pleaded not guilty. The motive of the ex-dentist, the government would come to argue, was not just the money. It was her.

Larry's attorneys argued in federal court that *USA v. Rudolph* was "as weak of a murder case as you can get." They point to Larry's cooperation with the Zambian police and their conclusion that his wife's death was an accident, despite the police report taking just two days to complete. They point to their client's lack of interference with a Zambian coroner's autopsy, even though consular officials alleged that Larry asked them, repeatedly, how African privacy laws might apply to autopsy and police records related to the case. They stand by the conclusions of an insurance investigation, which, according to an FBI agent's testimony summarizing its findings, had a primary goal only to ID the body as that of Bianca Rudolph and, the agent testified, found "outstanding questions" and "unresolved issues" about the police work in Zambia. Fundamentally, Larry's lawyer David Markus has insisted that Larry and his wife knew about each other's extramarital affairs for a long, long time.

In a statement, Larry's attorneys said: "Strangely, five years later, the feds brought charges without any real evidence – no eye witnesses, no forensics, no anything – except for some speculation sprinkled into a chasm of conjecture."

Larry and Lori's joint trial is scheduled for July. Most of the sources who spoke to ROLLING STONE for this story requested anonymity because they might be called as witnesses, or because they fear Larry might sue them from jail. They believe Larry and Lori are guilty of at least some of the charges, and a lot of them think the couple might get off easy, as the American millionaire so often does. "Unfortunately, the world is full of people like that," says a hunter and business executive who supported Larry before the murder charge. "Some people that have money think they can do whatever they want. Some people think they can get away with anything."

THE DOG RESCUERS

[*Cont. from 103*] ment. She was feeding and petting a second dog when Cheddar cocked his head and came nearer. "He could kind of, sort of see that I was loving up that dog – and that made him competitive," she says. He got close enough to Young to sniff her hand; she gave him a furtive scratch behind the ear. He liked that, so she gave him another scratch. For the first time, she saw his posture soften.

But it was autumn before she managed to get a leash on him and walk him to the smaller of the yards. Often, he'd whip his head at handlers: "He wanted nothing to do with any of us," says Young. But that tiny tell she'd spotted – his envy of other dogs – proved to be her gateway to Cheddar. When Tibbets – another of the Ohio rescues – presented himself for cuddles, Cheddar would leap on Young's lap and press against her hand.

The months ticked by; Cheddar's progress was glacial. No one knew when – or if – he'd make the crucial leap. Eighty-six percent of the dogs at BRC come far enough in treatment to graduate. Simple math will tell you that the other 14 don't; at some point, a decision is made to end a dog's pain humanely. There are team meetings weekly in either pod, then meetings with pod leaders and the clinic's directors. Each dog's progress is discussed in those meetings, as well as their sticking points.

"Do we feel like their quality of life is improving and that they're able to learn?" says Sarah Shively, the senior director of operations at BRC. "Can they do canine things like digging and marking, or do they spend the majority of time in a state of fear?" If the presence of people is still causing the dog suffering at about the 25-week mark, a consensus is reached to terminate treatment and end the dog's life.

But Cheddar thrilled everyone when he finally turned a corner in December. He stopped skulking in his kennel when his trainer approached. In play groups, he roughhoused with other dogs, though his idea of fun was to jump them, feet first, like a canine Jackie Chan. He graduated in February after 28 weeks, a very long stint at BRC. Because of his blindness, the ASPCA kept him in-house till someone in the area applied to adopt him.

Andy and Jessica Ferguson had lost a dog to cancer and were grieving her loss deeply when they saw Cheddar. "There was a pretty big hole in our house to fill; our other dog, Samson, was grieving, too," says Andy, who, like his wife, is a high school teacher. "We seem to choose the dogs who choose us," he says.

It's been a fortnight since the Fergusons brought Cheddar home. The space left behind by their sweet hound Sarah has been filled with commotion – and squeak toys. The first day the couple left their dogs alone, they erected a pen for Cheddar in the hallway. When they walked in the door, the pen was knocked flat and the two dogs were sunning side by side. "Samson broke him out playing doggy linebacker," says Andy. "Cheddar is Velcro'ed to Samson."

Except, it seems, at night, when Cheddar hops up on the bed and nestles between Andy and his wife. He's done that since his second day home. That first night, the couple took shifts on the recliner, catching a few hours' sleep apiece with Cheddar curled up in their laps. They know little of his backstory and like it that way – their love is such that they cannot bear the details. The word they use most about that dog is "grateful." He has dressed their wounds as they have his.

EDDIE VAN HALEN

[*Cont. from 109*] Ed didn't go quick – he died more than three years after he first told me he had lung cancer. But I'm sure he wasn't a burden on anyone, either. He pounced on gut-wrenching treatments and sought every solution possible to remain in his family's life.

He kept his mouth shut about his illness, seemingly saving his fans from worry and foreclosing any possibility of a pity party he had no interest in hosting. He never gave up and never wanted anyone to send the wrong signal to the world that he had.

Within weeks of Ed's death, more details about his final years begin to trickle out – many that I already knew, but some that I did not. The most surprising was that Ed and Hagar had apparently buried the hatchet over text messages beginning earlier in the year, in what Hagar referred to as a "love fest."

We heard from Wolf, too. Previously, he'd been a bit like Teller to Hagar's Penn. Now, promoting his new band Mammoth WVH, he went on *Howard Stern*. Then *Entertainment Tonight*. Then *Today*. He said Van Halen had indeed been planning a reunion tour, not with just Roth and Anthony but also with Hagar and possibly even Cherone. Both Anthony and Hagar confirmed they'd have been on board, while Roth, Cherone, and Alex kept mum on the subject.

The timing of what Wolf dubbed the "Kitchen Sink Tour" didn't quite jibe with what Ed had told me, but I guess it doesn't matter now. All I know is it would have been epic – and it would have meant that Ed conquered cancer.

FOR ME, and for anyone who ever heard Van Halen's first album, Ed's musical legacy was sealed before the end of Side One. He was the guitar hero's guitar hero, back when there was such a thing. But he never seemed to crave the spotlight like others in his echelon and only stepped in it when he had something exceptional to share. That's why he rarely traded barbs with Roth or Hagar, I think – he didn't want to engage in all the infighting. He just wanted to play.

Had my initial, smartass email languished in Ed's spam folder, I'd have cried the same tears upon learning he died. Concert photos of Eddie Van Halen torn from *Circus* and *Hit Parader* covered my boyhood walls. I'd gaze at his electric smile, as he lurched his tricolored Frankenstrat into his bare chest. I'd imagine what song he was playing in that frozen moment. I envied the photographers, too, because they got so much closer to Eddie Van Halen than I'd ever be.

I don't regret never telling Ed how much he meant to me, because I'm certain that's a big reason we bonded. Nearly his whole life, he was showered with praise, treated like he was something more than mortal. But, for me, he'd become just a regular guy full of the same contradictions and paradoxes, the same beauty and demons, as the rest of us. Watching Ed bravely face the end of his life gave me a new appreciation for my own. Now, I do my best to hang on a little tighter when things get tough, knowing Ed had it tougher.

Not a day goes by when I don't think of Ed because not a day goes by when I don't hear Van Halen's music. I'm still sad to have lost my friend, the person who gave me so much over the years and asked so little of me. And sometimes I'll send a text that ends in double-exclamation points, just to let him know I was listening.

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[*Cont. from 64*] to nearby Lansdowne when she was 14 years old. Lansdowne offered the family a driveway, so her parents didn't park away from home, which became particularly prudent with drive-by shootings happening in the city. "I have lost classmates to [gun violence], family members, friends," she says.

In October 2020, Brunson and West Philadelphia Councilwoman Jamie Gauthier discussed community safety in the face of gun violence on an Instagram Live they organized. "I ran up on her social media one day, because I was like, 'Is anybody doing anything about this?' " says Brunson. "My cousin had just died, and I just was, at that point, mad. I was like, 'I'm simply tired of this. Is anyone even trying?' And she was trying.

"A lot of it is systemic. A lot of it is socioeconomic. A lot of it is personal responsibility. It's a lot of parenting, or lack thereof, boredom, lack of after-school activities. There's so many things that lead to it being so horrible," says Brunson.

She's in talks about improving conditions for Philly teachers and students with other councilmembers, too. Councilwoman-at-Large Helen Gym introduced a resolution to honor Brunson's efforts on- and off-camera. "*Abbott Elementary* brings to prime-time television a loving ode to Philadelphia educators, school children, and their families, as well as a call to action to fund and support our youth and our public schools, and for that, this council body is both grateful and inspired," reads the resolution.

The show has partnered with Scholastic to provide free book fairs across the country, and has worked with other organizations to present a third-grade teacher and her southwest Philly school with new books, school supplies, a $40,000 check, and a new hallway mural.

Still, Brunson is careful not to come off as some celebrity savior and is more energetic about ending the endemic of underfunded public schools than helping out teachers on an individual basis.

"I don't want people to ever think I'm doing the celebrity thing, which is putting a Band-Aid on the problem by donating," she says. "At the end of the day, the donations help. I have friends who are teachers. They need it. We can and so we will, and it helps them in the meantime."

Personally, Brunson is looking forward to testing Janine, who, she says, she's very different from. Real-life Brunson might want to strangle Janine, she clarifies. She more so identifies with Principal Ava Coleman, many of whose lines are things Brunson has said in the writers room.

"There's one line in there that's specifically taken directly from my mouth," Brunson explains. In Episode Five, Janine asks Ava, "What happened?" when a difficult student is transferred from another classroom to hers. Ava, who should know why, dismissively responds, "Girl, I don't know, things happen all day."

If we're lucky, Brunson will be making *Abbott Elementary* for quite some time. She wants to be a mother, but is thinking she'll hold off on that. "I don't know if I'm stopping the train anytime soon to do it," she says. "I want to be able to be there with the child. I don't want to have a baby and then go back to work. I would love to take a year or two off to be able to be with a child. I don't know when I'm going to be able to do that."

She just moved into a four-bedroom house with her partner, an upgrade from the Studio City condo they shared. It has a pool that she's looking forward to using more. It allows friends and family to stay with her when they need to. And it's not too far from her favorite amusement park, so she can eat, drink, ride, and dream as much as she wants.

When Brunson brings me to Universal Studios Hollywood, it's Easter Sunday and very busy, which she jokingly finds sacrilegious. She's something of an expert on the park and professes to know the grounds like the back of her hand. "Fun fact, I've been almost kicked off the [studio tour] tram before," Brunson had explained. "The [guide] got one of the facts wrong, and I was like, 'That's not accurate.' She was like, 'OK.' Then at the end she was like, 'Hi . . . Quinta?' She knew who I was from BuzzFeed. She was like, 'We actually don't encourage that. I didn't really say anything because it was the middle of the tour, but please don't do that.' "

I had been encouraged by Brunson's reps to secure a VIP escort for the day at Universal, to fast-track us through rides and minimize disruptions. Given how often Brunson was still recognized, it was a good idea. Our guide, a generous and knowledgeable man named Bobby, had been working at the park for nearly a decade. He seemed impressed with Brunson's preprepared run of show for getting through the attractions. "I love this," he says after she outlines her schedule of attractions.

A theme throughout my time with Brunson was the way she managed to attract the kind of low-fidelity, real-life humor that defines her work. Strangers seemingly couldn't help but interrupt us with their own unique quirks, almost like they were auditioning for a background role on *Abbott*.

As we head to the *Transformers* ride, a man shouts "Ooh, he got money!" toward us, gleefully quoting the 2014 viral video that perhaps started things off for Brunson. Later that afternoon, we're cut in on by very-dedicated actors playing Dracula and Doc Brown from *Back to the Future,* who stop by our lunch table.

Then, there is the middle-aged woman who approaches us softly as we are eating. Her face is framed by blond, red, and brown braids, pulled back into a ponytail, and she has braces on her teeth. Brunson was talking to me about when she realized she wanted to make television shows, but she stops herself midsentence to greet the woman.

"I love it," the woman says with a quiet Southern drawl and a big smile.

"Thanks, girl," Brunson responds quickly.

"My son noticed you because he wants to be a teacher and he loves your show," the woman continues. "He don't watch regular TV because he don't like commercials. . . ."

"Just like my niece," Brunson empathizes.

"But he loves the show. Can I take a picture?"

Brunson kindly obliges, and I offer to take the picture. Brunson asks for the woman's name – it's Ramona – and introduces herself, too.

"Is there anything in my teeth?" Brunson asks me. I check them out and assure her there's not. I take two pictures of them.

Brunson asks Ramona questions about her trip – where her family is traveling from and how long they'll be in town. Ramona and her crew are wearing Universal T-shirts with neon-pink lettering that look like they were custom-made for the occasion.

"Good luck in your career," says Ramona as she makes her way back to her son. "I hope you continue to blossom. I hope you're successful."

CONAN GRAY

[*Cont. from 70*] In previous interviews, Gray has been candid about the fact that he's never been in a relationship, but now he shares with me that, since dropping *Kid Krow*, he's "had more experience" with love. "*Superache* is the realization that the reason I've been single my whole life is me. It's my fault," Gray confesses. "The album is like, 'Oh, the reason why you've been singing this whole time, Conan, is because you're fucking insane and there's something wrong with you and you push people away and you're terrified of commitment and terrified of vulnerability, and you write all these songs and you could never say any of those song topics to somebody's face.'"

And when it comes to loving, Gray tells me, he's a "lingerer," who struggles to let people go, even when the prospect of a relationship is just not there. "I don't really date, to be honest. . . . Someday I'll meet someone who will be right. But it hasn't happened yet," he says. "And the stories I got along the way were really funny. So that's what I talk about a lot on the album."

The only other time Gray dropped an album, the world was entering a state of isolation. "It felt like a very weirdly fitting thing," Gray says of *Kid Krow*. "I wrote it just sitting in bed. I released the album sitting in bed. And everyone listened to the album while sitting in bed. . . . I didn't realize how depressed I'd gotten until I went on tour, and I was like, 'Oh, wait, I was actually really sad.' It wasn't normal to be alone for that long."

This time, the album will drop just a few weeks after wrapping a world tour, where he's surrounded by real-life human beings who are singing his lyrics back to him, rather than screens and comments from @s on Twitter. "I'm just happy to be out and about and experiencing things," he says. "I was so afraid when I was younger. I was so afraid of making mistakes and so afraid of getting hurt. And now I'm like, 'I don't care if I get hurt. I don't care if I can get my heart broken or if something's unpleasant for a day.' I'm OK with it now. I'm inviting it because I'd rather feel everything super intensely than feel nothing at all."

I circle back to what he said earlier about being a "non-participator" – is that really the case when he's got thousands of eyes on him at each concert, and 6 million or so on Instagram? "I think I'll always kind of be a watcher rather than a participator. I'm kind of OK with it," he says. "It's not something that I think needs to be changed, but I do think now I'm, like, OK with people interfering with my observing."

A quivery voice approaches our coffee table mid-conversation. "Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to say I love your music," says a nervous girl, who spotted Gray while walking past the coffee shop. "I saw you at Coachella, and you were amazing."

I look at Gray, who probably gets this all the time. He hunches his back a little and scrunches his shoulders before thanking the passerby with automatic humility.

"That means the world to me," he responds, before diving back into our conversation. The self-proclaimed "observer of life" is still getting used to being observed.

BILLY STRINGS

[*Cont. from 78*] The unlikely duo have since been talking about collaborating in the studio. "I don't know what it would sound like, but I bet it would be a kickass song," Malone says. Strings views any duet with Malone the same way he approaches the idea of one day headlining arenas: It would have to happen naturally. But he once again credits Malone for opening his mind to popular music. "Maybe it's Auto-Tuned, maybe it's on the radio, but who cares?" Strings says.

Strings may have grown to appreciate certain radio hits, but he remains skeptical of the pop mainstream. At first, Strings was floored to receive an invitation from the Grammys to perform "Hide and Seek," his nine-minute song about suicide, at this April's awards show in Las Vegas. He outfitted his whole band in the haute couture of Alexander McQueen, Saint Laurent, and Burberry, and arrived on the roof of the MGM Grand ready to perform. Strings says when he walked to the stage, he gave himself the same speech he'd later say aloud in his Jeep after the Ryman.

"I said, 'Good job, kid, you're doing great, just stay calm.' I'm giving myself this pep talk and I walk up the stairs to the stage, and I take a step off a five-foot ledge into total fucking darkness," Strings says. "I land on my back. Cracked my guitar. Ripped my pants. Fucking knocked the wind out of me.

"I look at where I fell from and there's one tiny little thin line of white tape, which is not high-vis. And there's no railing. . . . Meanwhile, these fucking people are wiping off the smudges on my bandmates' instruments to make sure there are no fingerprints," he says. "They're so worried about that that they don't fucking put up a handrail?" (The Recording Academy did not respond to a request for comment.)

Strings retreated to his tent, smoked a bowl, and returned to play "Hide and Seek" (which ultimately ran as a bumper before and after a commercial) with a revelation. "Maybe I don't belong here," he says.

But it's clear that Strings is fully at home in front of his fans. At the Ryman, the night before our fishing expedition, he blazed through a 26-song set of originals including "Turmoil & Tinfoil," covers like Greensky Bluegrass' "A Letter to Seymour," and traditionals such as "Man of Constant Sorrow," a song he says some artists won't play because *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* made it too popular. He scoffs at that, but cites a song that won't ever appear on his set list. "I'm not going to play 'Wagon Wheel,'" he says. "That's about where I'll draw the line."

Strings hopes to headline even larger venues, but he has no overarching plan in place.

"What I need to do is keep my head down, stay the fuck out of this mainstream bullshit, keep doing what I'm doing, and just playing to our fans, who are showing up by the thousands," he says.

By now, it's early afternoon and Strings has to be at the Ryman for soundcheck. He's still exhausted from the night before.

"I feel like Baby Yoda after he uses the Force," Strings says back at the dock, dramatically throwing up his arms and letting them drop as if he's collapsing. But, he says, it's his fans that see him through. "They're rowdy as hell, so that just gives us all this fucking big-dick energy," he laughs. "Like, 'Oh, yeah, we're fucking badasses.'"

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Christine McVie

The songwriter on navigating the 'storm' of Fleetwood Mac

You're releasing a new collection of your solo recordings, but you've made only three solo albums during the past 50 years. Why is that?
Well, I've never felt I was a solo artist, particularly. I've always liked to be part of a group. . . . I also felt very uneasy about doing a solo tour for the material. And with this new compilation, I just went for favorite songs of mine and had them redone with extra instrumentation.

'Songbird,' McVie's first compilation of her solo work, is out now.

What music still moves you the most?
I'm a big fan of Steely Dan; the Beach Boys; Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. I like quite a broad range of people, and my favorite . . . the Beatles, of course. Some of their songs move me to tears.

How do you relax these days?
I watch a lot of TV. Really, that's about it. I don't really write songs to relax. When I feel a bit of pressure coming on, I'll get to the piano and see what I can come up with.

What's the best advice you ever received?
Not to lie. To be honest. That came from my parents. I can't imagine better advice coming from one's parents. I try to stick by that rule and to be as good a person as I can.

What's the worst part of success?
Being noticed if you don't want to be noticed. I'm not one of these people that's an extrovert. . . . But one shouldn't mind, because after all, they're paying you a terrific compliment.

If you could travel back in time to 1976, what advice would you give yourself?
I think I followed my map pretty well in the course of my life. . . . To be honest with you, I don't think I gave myself any advice. I think I just kind of got on with what I was doing and thoroughly enjoyed it. Obviously, my best beautiful days were when we were the Buckingham-Nicks Fleetwood Mac version. That was the best to me.

You were seen by many as the calm and the reasonable person in the eye of the hurricane that was Fleetwood Mac.
That is apparently true, but I didn't realize that at the time. Yes, I was supposedly like the Mother Teresa who would hang out with everybody or just try and [keep] everything nice and cool and relaxed. But they were great people; they were great friends.

What sort of toll did that take on you emotionally, to be that Mother Teresa figure?
I don't think I thought about it that much. I enjoyed the storm. . . . Even though I am quite a peaceful person, I did enjoy that storm. Although it's said that we fought a lot, we actually did spend a lot of our time laughing. So, that must have been forgotten. Great sense of humor.

People spent so much time talking about the Lindsey-Stevie dynamic that they overlooked that you were in the band for nearly five decades with your ex-husband, John McVie. What's that relationship like?
Well, we used to fight occasionally, but not that often. I think we sorted our differences out by then, and we actually got on really well. . . . It was never as melodramatic as Stevie and Lindsey. And right now, we don't live in the same hemisphere. He lives in L.A.; I live in London. But we occasionally write to each other or phone each other. . . . He's been suffering with a few health problems, but he's OK. So we talk a fair bit. He's a good man, John.

You took a 15-year break from the band in the early 2000s. How did you grow as a person in that time?
I just enjoyed having my dogs, living in the country, going for long walks. I just wasn't interested in playing music at that point. Then the feeling came back. Mick and I have always been in touch, and he said, "Do you ever think you'll ever come back?" I said, "I don't know." Suffice to say that I did decide to return and never regretted it.

Mick has said he wants to do a farewell tour with the *Rumours* lineup. Do you think that's a pipe dream?
Personally, I'd love to think it could happen. But honestly, I really can't see it happening. I don't know. I've been wrong before.

Mick wants Lindsey back in the band; Lindsey wants to come back. Do you want him back?
I'd always want Lindsey back. He's the best.

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